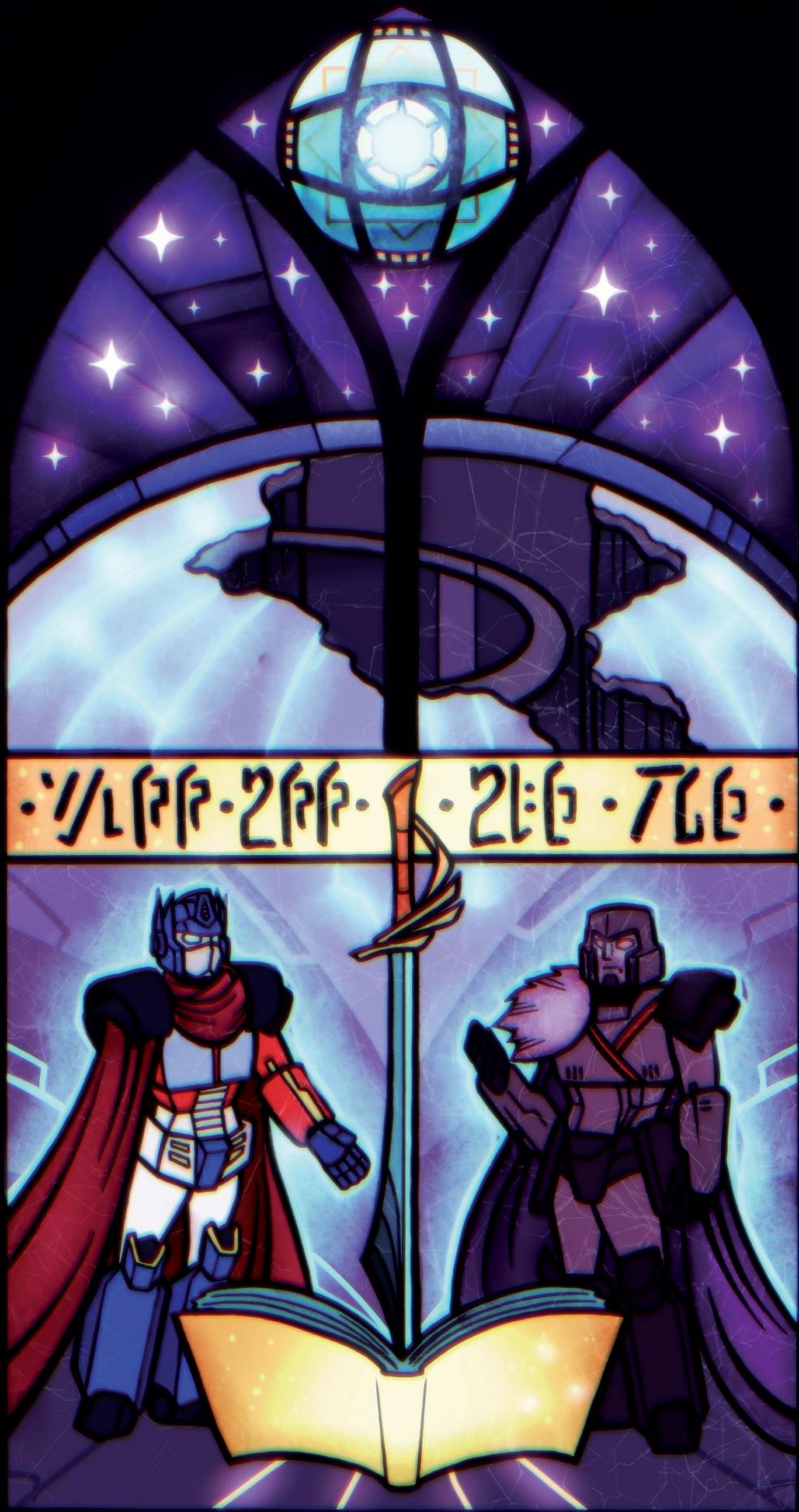




# MYTHOS

THE COLLECTED MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF CYBERTRON





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The Founders of Vos City



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**DRUNKRAT**

Feats from the Útgardr



DRUNKRATTRAP

**Ginawo**

Nowhere to Hide



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A New Beginning



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**Eldritch Araneae**

Life Warden



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Red Rusting Hoods



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The Frog Prince



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Drunkrat

# Die, Lie, Loot: A Starscream Story



Written By: blueskyscribe

Illustrated by: Chaos Wolf



nce there were three brothers, Seekers all. Thundercracker had a level head, Skywarp had an insatiable curiosity, and Starscream had a tongue as sharp as a knife, which he wielded freely.

"Excuse *you*, Sunstorm," he said one day as the Seekers readied for battle, "but could you clear your worthless aft off the airstrip?"

"I'm busy," the gold Seeker said, never looking up.

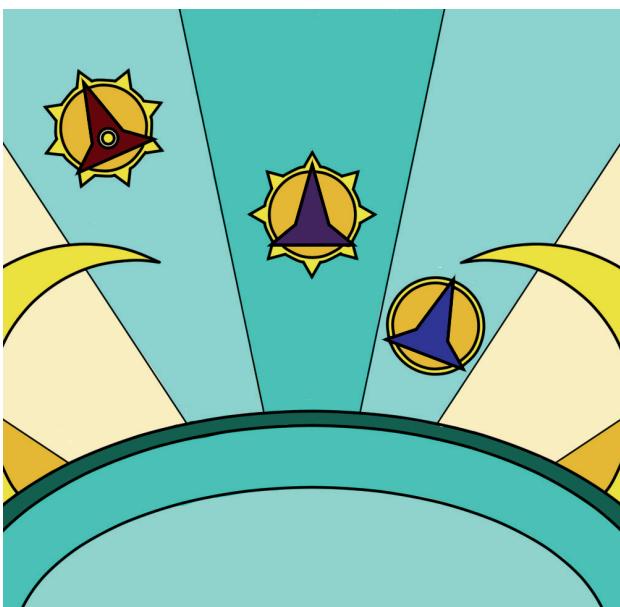
"Busy doing what?" Starscream moved closer, eyeing the complex, flower-like pattern that Sunstorm was carefully constructing out of thin silver wire. "What's this mess?"

"It's a Ritual of Blessing, as described in the Covenant of Primus." Sunstorm lifted his optics to the sky and clasped his hands together. "Our glorious creator shall lend strength to my flight! Far more than the *unworthy* could achieve," he added with a pointed look.

"Oops." With a low kick, Starscream turned the delicate pattern into a meaningless tangle of wires. "My unworthy foot slipped."

The battle started off well that day. Starscream sped through the sky flanked by his brothers. Skywarp, who was easily distracted and could teleport away in an instant, had been given strict instructions to stick by Starscream's left wing no matter what. The three jets were a sight, in perfect formation as they flew alongside the other trines, strafing the battlefield with laserfire.

Then, with a terrible boom, a shell punched through Sunstorm's wing. As he screamed and tumbled, Starscream spotted the anti-aircraft gun that had downed him—and more being pulled into position.

 "Follow my lead!" Starscream barrel-rolled as he swept right. Thundercracker rolled too. But Skywarp—true to his instructions—stayed glued to Starscream's left wing, performing a remarkable cartwheel through the sky which concluded when he crashed into Thundercracker. The force of the collision sent Thundercracker careening into Starscream.

"What are you dolts *doing*?" Starscream shrieked. "Of all the stupid stunts—"

And that was as far as he got before the anti-aircraft guns tore into them, THOOM-THOOM-THOOM. They fell, engulfed in flames.



After a time, Skywarp pushed himself out of the rubble. Thundercracker and Starscream were doing the same, the latter swearing through clenched teeth.

"Wow, that was some crash, huh?" Skywarp gazed down at the greying Seeker corpses. "Who are they?"

"They're us," Thundercracker said wearily. "We're dead."

"Oh. But there are four of 'em."

"Sunstorm got fragged too," Starscream said sourly.

"Such language!" chided Sunstorm, who was indeed standing just off to the side. "So *unbecoming*. But I forgive you, Starscream. For on this glorious day Primus shall say, 'Sunstorm, most worthy of my creations, I welcome you to the Allspark. Despite the fact that I let you die beside blasphemers and heretics—'"

"Hey, it's getting dark, huh?" Thundercracker said quickly, before Starscream could attempt to murder a ghost. "Weird. It's barely noon."

It was true. As the color leached from their corpses, so did the color drain from the world around them until it was darker than midnight. The sound of gunfire and the cries of the living becoming warped, distorted. Only one thing had clarity: a glowing path which drifted into the sky.

"What's *that*?" Skywarp squinted.

"The path to the Allspark!" Jubilant, Sunstorm ran towards it.

The three brothers exchanged glances. "I mean, where else are we gonna go?" Thundercracker shrugged.

They followed the path skyward. Fine gold sand sifted beneath their feet and poured off the skyway in slow, lazy streams, like light rippling through water. Sunstorm hurried on ahead but Starscream paused to fill his subspace with as much gold dust as he could fit.

"Dead bots don't need gold," Thundercracker said.

"*You* don't know that," Starscream retorted, and on they went.

The path climbed and climbed until it reached a clearing, crowded with bots of all shapes and sizes. Before them rose a huge crystalline dome. It was too thick to see through, yet they found themselves mesmerized by the way its faceted surface shimmered and glowed.

"Whoa," Skywarp said, awed. Then, pointing, "Hey, there's Sunstorm! Sunstorm, what are you—"

But Sunstorm, face downturned and despondent, shuffled past them without looking up.

"That's not like him," Thundercracker said. "I wonder what happened."

"Who cares," Starscream said with his usual thoughtfulness, pushing through the crowd as he made his way towards the gold-and-ivory desk set up by the gate.

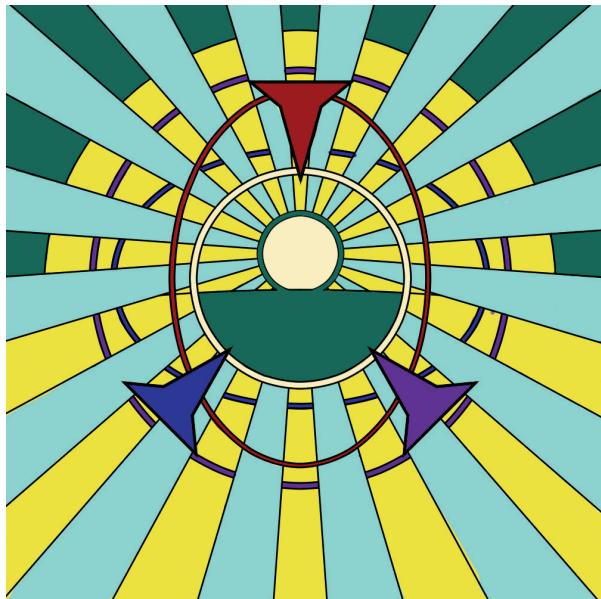
Behind the desk sat a large bot with the tallest shoulders Starscream had ever seen. The frown on his face, which seemed permanent, was currently divided between the datapad in his hand and the scuffed working class bot standing before him. Some kind of transport vehicle, Starscream guessed.

"But I don't understand," the scuffed bot was saying, "why we can't go in."

"Well, Mister—" A glance at the datapad. "—Pax, if you had done your *research* you would understand that Primus has standards. And he has set me, the Duly Appointed Gatekeeper of the Allspark, to ensure that entrants fulfill them."

"But I've been here a long time and I haven't seen the gates open once," Pax said.





time he arrived it was more of a strut.

"We're here," Starscream said grandly. "Open the gate, my good bot."

The Gatekeeper's eyes narrowed. "And you are?"

"Names aren't importa—"

Skywarp teleported in front of Starscream with a *vwop*. "I'm Skywarp! And these are my bros, Starscream and Thundercracker!"

"Hm." The Gatekeeper looked down at his datapad, eyes narrowing. "Hmmmm."

"N-now our history might sound bad," Thundercracker said, "but, uh, keep in mind bombing stuff is just part of the job, so—"

Starscream kicked his ankle. "What my brother means," he said sweetly, "is that it's common for records to get *mixed up*, isn't it? But I'm sure if you look *hard* enough you'll find our *real* records, hmmm?" And out of his subspace he drew a handful of gold dust, letting it glitter temptingly.

The Gatekeeper drew himself upright. "Are you trying to *bribe me*?"

Starscream's smile faltered. "Well, I wouldn't say 'bribe' . . ."

"Don't worry, Screamer, I'll get us in!" Skywarp said. "Check *this* out!" And he teleported in a shower of purple sparkles . . . only to bounce off an invisible astral barrier. He reappeared, disoriented, and fired his thrusters at the wrong moment, rocketing right into the Gatekeeper's golden desk with a loud crunch.

For a moment everyone was frozen and slack-jawed, except Skywarp who was rubbing a dent in his helm amidst a nest of golden splinters.

The Gatekeeper picked up his datapad (now cracked) and glared at them.

"You know, this place really isn't up to our standards anyway," Starscream said. And putting his nose in the air, he strutted (swiftly) away.



"Now where do we go?" Skywarp asked.

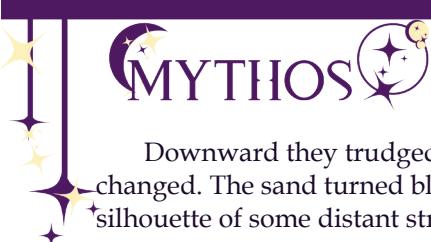
"Where do you think?" Starscream kicked at the ground, sending up a spray of golden sand. "Back to Cybertron."

"But it's all weird and spooky! Can't we go back to the gate and, like, hang around?"

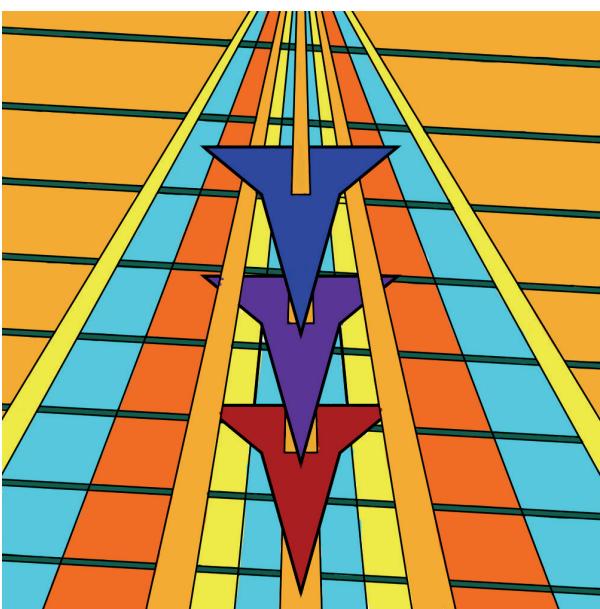
"We could have if someone hadn't humiliated me."

"Hey, 'Warp was just trying to help," Thundercracker said.

"Oh yes, isn't he *always*."



Downward they trudged, with Cybertron hanging in the distance like a tarnished moon. Gradually the path changed. The sand turned black and a pale mist settled over them, so thick they could barely see the looming silhouette of some distant structure, spherical and ringed with dim red lights.



"What's that? I don't like it." Skywarp balked in its shadow, grabbing his brother's arm. "Screamer, let's go back."

Starscream, who had been thinking much the same, shook his hand off. "We have to *look* at it, at least."

He stepped deeper into the fog and discovered, by feel, what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary metal door, already open.

"Come on," Starscream said; his brothers reluctantly followed him. As soon as they passed the threshold, the doors slammed shut with the swiftness of a turbofox snapping up its prey. They stood in the mouth of a cavernous room, bustling with activity.

"Is this a factory?" Thundercracker said, looking at the bots turning cranks, pushing carts, and stirring bubbling vats of acid.

"Is this a palace?" Skywarp said, gazing up at the lofty grey walls studded with jewels.

Starscream, taking in the rust-infected workers and their despondent expressions, put a hand behind him to push at the doors.

They didn't budge. He cleared his throat. "It's interesting, at least."

"Maybe those guys can tell us where we are," Thundercracker said. He approached a bot who was wearily pushing a cart. "Hey—"

"Quiet!" the bot whispered, glancing to and fro in panic. "You mustn't speak to me! We'll both end up in the wall!"

"The wall?" Thundercracker said. But the bot merely ducked his head and hurried away.

Skywarp teleported to one of the massive grey walls, reaching to touch it. "Maybe the walls have, like, secret passages or—ewww, gross!"

The walls, which seemed so innocuous from a distance, were built of bodies, and their glitter came not from gemstones, but from the glassy optics of horror-frozen faces. Greyed out corpses had been forced into a macabre puzzle, squashed, stacked, and contorted.

The brothers stared, speechless. Then all at once the wall before them creaked and heaved. Fingers twitched and faces grimaced. Eyes—blue, yellow, red, purple—blazed with light and many mouths dropped open in unison. Yet a single voice boomed out:

"Welcome, slaves. Here you will toil for my benefit."

"And who are *you*, exactly?" Starscream managed to croak.

"I am Unicron," the voice said, reverberating through their very sparks. "What I am is beyond your meager comprehension. It is enough that you obey."

"And if we don't?" Thundercracker bristled.

"You shall," Unicron said; the Seekers clutched their chests at the wave of pain that accompanied his voice.

Unicron ordered Starscream to push a cart laden with stones. They were never delivered anywhere; he was to push them in an eternal, pointless circle. No matter; Starscream was already plotting his escape.

Eventually his route took him through the room where Skywarp had been assigned to endlessly turn a crank and Thundercracker to sort bolts by size, before mixing them up and sorting them again.

"There you are," Starscream said.

"Screamer! I was getting worried, I hadn't seen you anywhere."

"He sneaks around," Thundercracker frowned, "which he shouldn't."

Skywarp smiled and shrugged. "Exploring is fun. Even here."



"Amazing insight. Scintillating," Starscream said. "Good news, Skywarp: I've forgiven you. Now hurry up and warp us out of here."

"Forgiven him for what?" Thundercracker said.

"For getting me into this mess. I would *never* have touched that door if Skywarp hadn't made such a *fuss* about it."

"Are you seriously trying to pin it on him? Starscream—"

Skywarp interrupted. "I've tried, Screamer, but my trans-demonical navigation doohickey won't cooperate"

"Transdimensional," Thundercracker murmured.

"Yeah, that. I can't get through the outer wall. The best I can do is . . ." In a flash of purple light the three of them warped across the room. ". . . move around inside."

"Well, that doesn't get us out of this horror-show, now does it?" Starscream shook his arm loose. "Ugh, I'll have to do everything myself. *As usual.*"

Thundercracker lifted his eyes to the ceiling and heaved a sigh. He turned to Skywarp, who was looking downcast. "Thank you, Skywarp, for *trying*. Right, Starscream?"

"Yes," Starscream said, "thanks for nothing."



He had barely left the room when he saw another familiar face. "Sunstorm?"

"Starscream?" Sunstorm's eyes grew huge; then he looked away. "Starscream, I owe you an apology."

Starscream's eyebrows shot up. "Oh?" he said encouragingly.

"I thought I was blessed by Primus," Sunstorm said. "But he saw my true spark and judged it lacking."

He looked so downhearted that Starscream felt a scrap of pity for him. "Well, Sunstorm—"

"Your spark was lacking too, clearly, or you wouldn't have ended up here. But *that's* no surprise."

Starscream gritted his teeth. "Goodbye, Sunstorm." He began to push his cart away.

"Wait!" Sunstorm called after him. "Don't you want to join me in praying that Primus will forgive us for our unworthiness?"

Starscream walked faster.



He was determined to escape. It wouldn't be easy. Unicron was not omnipresent, but his malicious consciousness could inhabit any wall or pillar.

At the earliest opportunity Starscream hid a pickaxe in the bottom of his cart and snuck to the huge metal doors. He landed blow after blow on the hinges, yet he didn't leave a single dent. And then, inevitably, the walls around him lit with Unicron's stare.

He dropped the pickaxe and put on an oily smile as he turned around. "Great Unicron! I just saw a bot trying to defile your amazing home. He fled when he saw me, but—"

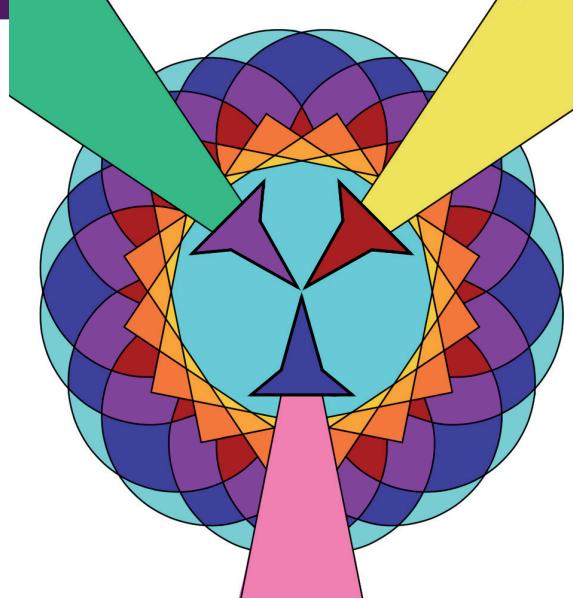
"Do not take me for a fool," Unicron warned, but there was an amused tone to his voice. "You are bold, slave."

"I'm wasted here," Starscream said. "If I were out *there*, why, who *knows* what wonders I could bring you." And he scooped the gold dust from his subspace, letting it glitter in his cupped palms.

"Hmm," Unicron said. "Perhaps you can serve a greater purpose. I seek something on Cybertron. A trinket. You shall find it."

Starscream couldn't believe his luck. "Certainly."

"Good," Unicron said. "This is your quarry."





An image appeared in Starscream's mind: a spherical container with a handle at either end, surrounding a luminous blue crystal.

"And how shall I retrieve it if I'm locked in here?" Starscream asked, casually as he could.

"The doors shall open for you. Do not betray me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Starscream said.



Starscream was eager to escape, but curious too. He made his way back to Sunstorm and sketched the shape of Unicron's "trinket" in the dust.

"Have you ever heard of something like this?"

Sunstorm's optics grew wide. "The Matrix," he whispered. "A holy artifact of Primus, under whose feet we are but scrap-metal—"

"Do you know where it's kept?" Starscream interrupted, wiping the drawing away.

"One of the temples, perhaps? There are several hundred."

"Hmm."

As Starscream started to turn away, Sunstorm caught his arm. "It is rumored to wield great power against darkness," Sunstorm whispered, his optics hopeful.

Starscream pushed him off. "Good to know."



As promised, the ironbound doors of Unicron opened at Starscream's touch. The sky-path unwound before him, leading to Cybertron. As before, it looked odd to the eyes of the dead, smothered in a thick, swirling darkness that neither lightened nor lifted. Every sound, from the rev of engines to the whirling of the wind, was dissonant and strange. Starscream stumbled around in the dark for a while before giving up and returning to Unicron.

"My Great Lord," he said, bowing low before the dark presence, "your humble servant looked everywhere, but alas, when one can't even see his own feet . . ."

"So you have failed."

Starscream's fawning smile wavered, just slightly. "I was temporarily hampered. But if you restored me to life—"

"I cannot. However, I can offer a deal. I will give you the ability to see true . . . in exchange for something of value to you."

Starscream's hand protectively dipped into his subspace, crammed with gold dust. "But I'm doing this quest for *you*."

"There are always others."

Starscream scowled. "Fine."

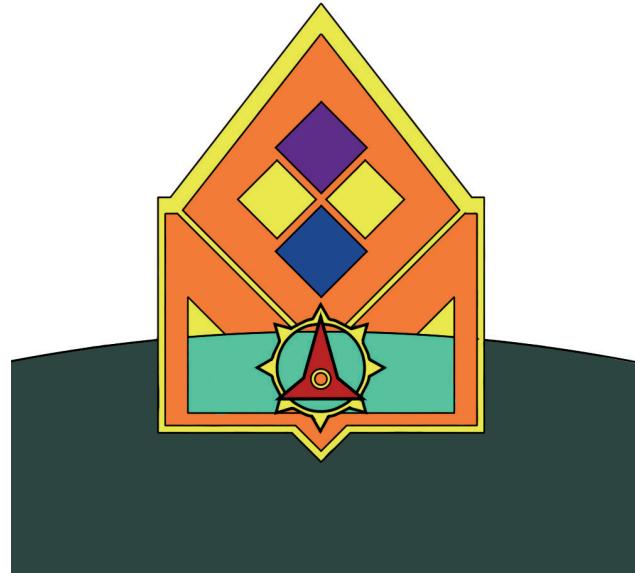
All at once the volume in his subspace lessened, replaced by a weight atop his head. A crown now sat there, gleaming gold and set with rubies as red as the eyes through which Unicron watched him.

"Are you satisfied, slave?"

"Qu-quite."

"Then go."

And once again the doors opened.





This time when he stepped foot on Cybertron, the darkness cleared away. The world was black-and-white and slightly pixelated, but he could see sufficiently . . . as long as he wore the crown. Removing it made the world devolve into chaos again.

But Starscream was happy to wear it, after all.

He searched, but he was only one bot. Furthermore, his ghostly form had no way of interacting with the living world; his fingers passed through every object, even the tiniest pebble. The Matrix could have been hidden under a scrap of tinfoil and he'd never know.



"Sooo, Sunstorm, have you narrowed down where the Matrix might be?"

"Yes." Sunstorm hesitated. "But I don't know if I should tell you."

"Why not? You want to get out of here, don't you?"

"The Matrix is a holy relic. Only Primus is worthy to wield it!"

"Well, he's not here, is he! If I had it—"

"Hey Screamer!" With a flash of purple light, Skywarp encroached on the conversation. "Have you seen Thundercracker?"

Starscream scowled; he had been on the cusp of convincing Sunstorm, and here came Skywarp ruining everything. "No, I haven't. He's probably pushing a button repeatedly or something equally asinine."

"Nah, lately he's been carrying bricks back 'n forth. But he's been gone, like, a whole day." Skywarp looked worried. "He was by the gross wall, saying, like, he thought the dead bots weren't really dead? Because they already died once, I guess? It was kind of boring so I was thinking about that time back at the Sea of Rust. . . Man, that place was cool. The sunsets were so pretty. I wish they hadn't transferred us away from there, we coulda explored the canyons and—"

"Focus."

" . . . Oh yeah, so, Thundercracker. He was talking and then all of a sudden he was gone."

"Well, I haven't seen him." Starscream gave him a little shove. "Goodbye, Skywarp."

"Fine. Geez, Starscream, you're so *rude*." But just as it seemed Skywarp would leave, he noticed Sunstorm. "Wait, you're here too?"

"Hello, Skywarp. Yes, I am here, for I am but dust in Primus' eyes. Let me tell you of my travails—"

Starscream gave up and stalked away. Well, perhaps he could turn a disadvantage to his favor. He stepped into the hall. "Ahem. Mighty Unicron, I have returned!"

The wall pulsed and the many optics of the dead lit up. "Indeed you have, lowly one."

"My search continues. But how will I deliver the item to you when I find it, great Unicron?"

"I can grant you something of use . . . if you give up something of value."

"Of course, my liege. Take what you will."

Starscream's subspace emptied of dust as decorative golden talons, such as the nobles wore, appeared on his fingers. The delicate chains dangling from them chimed as he turned his hands to and fro, admiring their filigree.

"With these," Unicron said, "you may touch the living world and carry its burdens. With these you shall bring me my prize."

"Of course, Master, of course." Starscream bowed low and backed out of Unicron's presence. He returned to Sunstorm, who was glancing about in puzzlement.

"Well?" Starscream said. "Are you going to give me the location or not?"

"I suppose there's no harm in it," Sunstorm said. "As Skywarp pointed out to me, you're 'an aft'. And Primus will undoubtedly strike down any unworthy bot who dares set a sinful finger on it. Which would certainly include you."

Starscream refrained from rolling his eyes. "What wisdom. And from Skywarp, no less."

"Yes . . ." Sunstorm glanced around again. "Strange. He was here but a moment ago. I looked away for only a moment . . ."

"He warped away, *obviously*."

"Ye-es, I suppose." Sunstorm hesitated. "Usually there's a sound when he does that. Like 'vwop.'"

"Mm-hm. So—the location?"



Now armed with coordinates, Starscream returned to Cybertron. He found the weathered remains of a temple, little more than rubble covered by rusted metal panels. With his golden talons, Starscream was able to shove them aside, revealing the entrance to an underground chamber. Down he went.

The passage led to a simple room. A faded mural on the far wall showed an enormous bot holding a lantern, which was set in a precisely carved nook in the wall, positioned to give the illusion that the figure was holding it.

"Found you," Starscream crooned, prying it free.

The moment it was in his hands, the world around him grew clearer and color spread along every surface, even after Starscream cautiously removed his golden crown. To his surprise, he could also hold it without his golden talons.

But he put his finery back on quickly—he had earned it, after all.



Returning, he kicked Unicron's doors open. "Oh mighty layabout," Starscream called. "Where are you?"

"Watch your tongue, slave." Unicron manifested in front of him, his many eyes glaring. But Starscream held the Matrix aloft.

"You will be *my* slave now," he smirked. "I hold that which you fear. And I won't hesitate to use it." He slid his fingers into the handles of the artifact and pulled and—

Nothing happened. He pulled harder, but nothing budged.

The rumble that shook the walls might have been laughter. "Imagine thinking you are worthy of such a thing, pathetic fool. I might have spared you, left your ghost to roam Cybertron with the gifts you paid so dearly for. Now, you will meet the same fate as your tributes."

"You will not catch *me* gilding your walls or filling your treasure trove," Starscream sneered, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

"Did you give *me* gold, or do you wear it on your person, purified and forged? Was its value *reduced* when I bejeweled it and bestowed it with magic?" The eyes in the wall dulled, one by one, until only two pairs remained . . . two red pairs of optics, two jaws opening to mouth Unicron's words . . . the twitching, greyed out bodies of two Seekers. "These you have given me."

For a moment Starscream stood frozen. Then he laughed uncertainly. "Those aren't--those aren't *them*. They're some other Seekers—"

"Are they?" the death-grey Seekers rumbled, and suddenly color spread across their chassis—blue on one, black and purple on the other—as they began to struggle.

"Starscream, get out of here! Run!" Thundercracker cried. Starscream, ever the contrarian, grabbed him and pulled. But even as he caught Thundercracker's wrist, the blue plating turned grey again. Unicron's laugh rumbled as he reached to claim the Matrix—

—and Skywarp, still his own stupid self, grabbed Starscream's other wrist. *Vwop!* In the blink of an eye they were at the door. As Unicron snarled and lit every malevolent eye, Skywarp shoved Starscream . . . shoved him out into the mist a moment before the doors snapped shut.



Starscream sat on the ground, dazed, Matrix clutched to his chest.

"Well. I'm free. Everything worked out," he said shakily. The mist lay cold and white around him. After a time he got up and started to walk.



"My goodness! Is that the *Matrix*?" the Duly Appointed Gatekeeper said. "Now delivering *that* certainly makes you worthy of entry. The rest of you take note," he added, giving the crowd a stern look as he let Starscream in.

Inside the Allspark, rolling hills of silver grass reflected a crystal blue sky. Gauzy banners fluttered from shining towers which rose above mysterious ironwood forests. Beyond, burbling streams of energon wandered past gazebos draped in flowers.

"I've made it," Starscream said into a silence broken only by a gentle wind and the swish of grass. There were no other bots here. The Allspark was perfect, but perfectly empty.

Or so Starscream thought until he heard a distant humming. He followed the sound to its source: a spindly little orange-and-white bot tending a garden. He turned when he heard Starscream, dropping his watering can to clap with delight.

"Oh! A guest at last. Have a seat, won't you? And some tea." He ushered Starscream to a round little table and a small metal chair. "Oh, and you brought the *Matrix* back! How nice. You can just put it there—yes, thank you. Now you must tell me all about how you came here. Except the unpleasant parts. Unless you *want* to share them. It's up to you. I'm always happy to listen."

Starscream sat slowly, eyeing the earnest bot. "Who are you?"

"I'm a sort of, well, creator. I believe you call me Primus in the current age."

"*You're* Primus? *You're* our *god*?"

"It sounds so grand when you put it like that. But please don't stand on formality. I'm simply glad you're here. It's been so quiet lately. You know how it is, bots get bored, they ask to be reincarnated. And we haven't had anyone *new* arrive in so long!" Primus sighed. "It's strange. I sent Magnus out (dear Magnus, so faithful) out to make sure someone was there to open the gate, and yet—"

Starscream snorted. "Dear Magnus' decided the gates were better off closed forever."

"Oh *dear*. I should have checked on him more often. But I didn't want him to feel like I was *hovering*." Primus wrung his hands. "Please excuse me, I must remedy the situation."

"Wait! Wait a moment. What do you know of a creature called Unicron?"

"Oh, have you met my brother?"

"If he runs a hellhole made of corpses."

"Yes," Primus sighed, "that sounds like him."

"Well, aren't you going to go out there and destroy him? Grab your mighty sword or whatever?"

"Oh no." Primus looked pained. "I'm in no position to perform any grand rescues. My true body isn't *this*, but Cybertron itself. If I were to transform, it would destroy, well, everything."

Starscream glared. "So what!"

"So, it is my brother's nature to destroy and mine to create," Primus said. He tilted his head thoughtfully, then held out the *Matrix* by one handle. "I think, after all, you may yet need this."

Starscream crossed his arms and looked away. "It doesn't work. Not for me."

"This time will be different," Primus said, "if you are."

Starscream snorted. But when Primus' kindly smile didn't fade, he grabbed the *Matrix* and stomped out of the Allspark. Down the path. Mist swirled around him as he hammered on the iron doors.

"Open up, you eldritch freak!" Starscream shouted.

The doors creaked open. "Enter, slave."



Starscream marched in. "Show me my brothers," he said. He threw his crown to the floor, cast off his jeweled talons. "Give them to me and you'll get your stupid *trinket*."

Unicron laughed, and Starscream caught sight of his brothers – trapped and pupeted once more – among the heaving mass of the wall.

"Did you think I would reward you after your betrayal, foolish one?" Arms reached for him, catching Starscream's wings and arms, pulling him towards, into, the grey mass. "You shall serve me for all eternity."

Starscream wrapped himself around the Matrix as darkness closed in around him. Deep in his chassis his spark dimmed. But it did not extinguish.

*It can't, he thought. We're already dead.*

Feeble as this scrap of hope was, he clung to it. As his spark pulsed, he felt the Matrix pulse with it. And the other bodies, bots trapped in this terrible limbo, not dead but not allowed to live – he could feel their sparks too, matching time to his. A slow beat, growing faster.

Every movement was a struggle, but Starscream managed to grip one of the Matrix's handles. Then the other.

Now to pull. But he couldn't. There was no room. He tried anyway. His limbs were numbing, turning grey.

"So, another fool arrives," Unicron said, and to Starscream's horror his mouth moved with the words.

His flickering vision saw Sunstorm staring, frozen in terror.

Starscream's spark pulsed. Thundercracker's, Skywarp's, and a thousand others pulsed with it, lending their strength. Starscream twisted his mouth out of the sneer Unicron had set on it. Shoving with all his might, he worked one arm forward until it punched out of the mass, the Matrix hanging from one clenched fist.

Sunstorm's optics lit in understanding. He stepped forward, gripped the other handle, and pulled. A brilliant blue light poured forth; Unicron howled in rage as the wall began to crumble.



"It's nice, isn't it?" Primus beamed. "A happy ending."

"It's not bad," Starscream said grudgingly.

"Is something wrong, dear? You've been quiet. I'm sorry it took so long for us to have a private moment, but I've been so busy welcoming everyone –"

"It would have been faster if Magnus hadn't insisted on reading that *thing* to every bot."

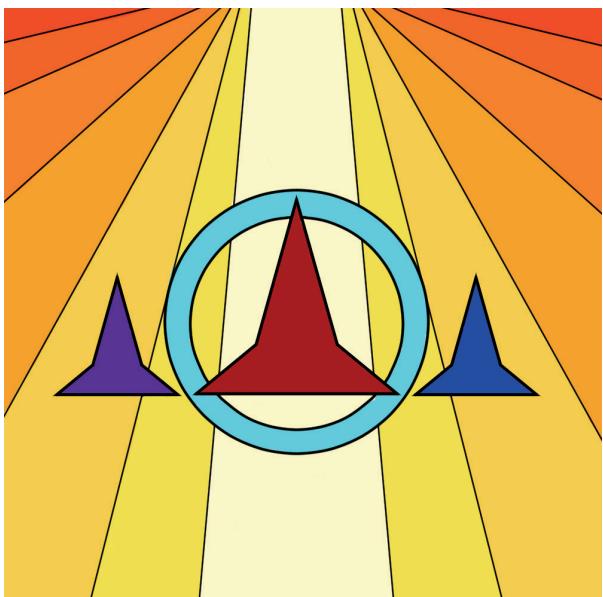
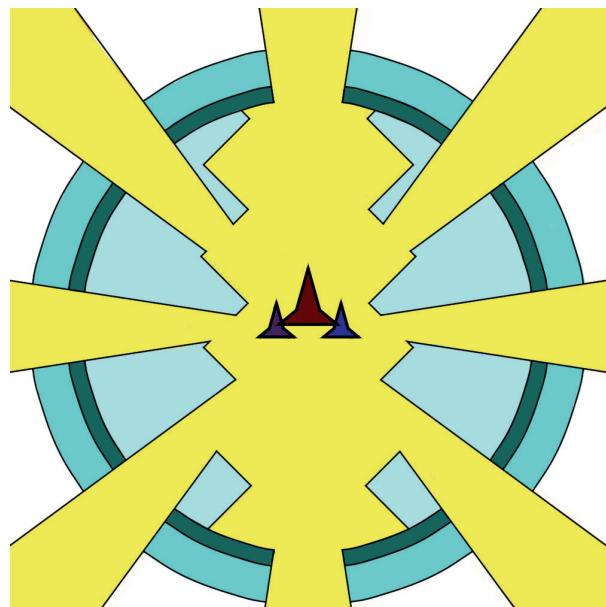
"His Officially Notarized Issuement of Sincere Apology, you mean?" Primus' lips twitched. "It *was* lengthy. But he felt very bad about misunderstanding my instructions, and reciting it made him happy." He set down his tea and cupped his chin in his hand. "How can I make *you* happy, my dear? A more elegant home? Fine silks? A crown?"

"No," Starscream said. "No crowns." He hesitated. "Supposing . . . Magnus . . . had felt bad about something he *possibly* did wrong, but he didn't *know* the words to put in his letter? Supposing –

theoretically – he wanted to apologize, but was bad at it?"

"Ah, I s – "

"And imagine it's particularly hard because he's usually perfect."



"Yes . . . quite. Well, I would remind, ahem, *Magnus* that acknowledging your flaws shows strength, not weakness." Seeing Starscream's uncertain expression, Primus added, "Words come more easily—and show more sincerity—when accompanied by action. Tell them you're sorry and show them you're sorry. Does that help?"

"Yes," Starscream said slowly. Then, nodding with conviction: "Yes, it does."



The next morning Primus was contentedly watching some bots racing on a distant roadway—and pondering how to convince Sunstorm that looking at him directly wouldn't burn out his optics—when Magnus hurried up, agitated.

"Primus, sir!" Magnus said. "Someone has *stolen* the Matrix!"

"Oh, did they?"

"Yes, it was stored, as per regulation—"

"There aren't any regulations about where to store it."

"I made some."

"Ah," Primus bit his lip. "Continue."

"I put it in the garden shed, since it can be classified as a tool. And now it's gone! Furthermore—" His frown intensified. "—three bots *snuck out* of the Allspark last night!"

"It's a paradise, Magnus, not a prison," Primus said mildly. "They can come and go as they wish."

"But they must have been the ones who made off with the Matrix! Who knows where they are now!"

"I think," Primus said, "they are probably in the Sea of Rust."

"What?"

"Never mind." Primus reached to his chest, which had begun to glow a brilliant blue, and when the light dimmed he was holding the Matrix. Or *a* Matrix. "Here you are, my dear. You can put it in the shed, or wherever you please. A tool. That's very apt. But you can have more than one shovel, you know."





# Red Rusting Hood



Written By: Lush Specimen

Illustrated by: emlos



Ratchet slumped into the first available chair. The sharp scent of disinfectant hung above metallic notes of fresh energon. He absent-mindedly checked his chronometer to see exactly how long his shift had been and groaned.

Eighty-seven hours?!

He half-wanted to check for malfunctions, but he knew it was accurate.

Optimus barged into the medbay hours ago and insisted that Ratchet stop. That he needed to rest. But he couldn't. Not while he still had a chance to save a few more lives from their endless war. If Autobots and Decepticons were so damned determined to kill each other, then Ratchet was equally determined to thwart their every effort.

The medbay was finally calm. The soft chirping of medical monitors mercifully replaced the screams of the wounded. Ratchet had managed to save more than expected, but not as many as he hoped. Folding his arms, he leaned back in the chair. He vented deeply and shut his optics. Just for a second...

SCREEEEECH!

The medical emergency frequency! Ratchet jolted awake. He automatically activated his comm link and his CMO protocols decoded the encrypted message.

"This is First Aid. I don't have much time. I've gathered a few survivors but we got cut off in the retreat. Everyone is stable, but we can't move without additional supplies. I've attached a detailed list of what we need and added our current coordinates. Please hurry!"

Ratchet bolted upright. More survivors!

He checked the list. Although their own supplies were running low, they had everything First Aid requested. Dashing through their supply cabinet, he quickly threw everything together along with a few extras. In the aftermath of another vicious battle, it's best to be prepared.

Once Ratchet had gathered everything, he stopped short. Who would deliver them across the barren battlefield in the gathering night?

Logging into their base's security feed, Ratchet noted that Optimus, Prowl, and Ironhide were holed up in the command center with the other generals, likely planning their next move. He couldn't disturb them. The best members of the infantry were patrolling the base's perimeter. They were no help either. The rest of his medical staff passed out hours ago. A quick glance around the medbay filled with injured soldiers in recharge yielded precious few options.

Ratchet shrugged. He was the only person not otherwise occupied at the moment. He would deliver the supplies himself. Besides, as the CMO, saving lives was his entire job description.

He made his rounds through the crowded medbay one last time to make sure everyone was stable. As he checked the last row of patients someone grabbed his hand. He startled at the unexpected contact.

"Where you sneaking off to, Ratch?" Sideswipe grinned despite his vocalizer screeching like a rusty chainsaw.

"Dammit, Sides!" Ratchet huffed. "I told you! Don't use your voice until those welds temper."

Ratchet had extracted a handful of shrapnel, shard by jagged shard, out of Sideswipe's vocalizer. Speaking too soon would destabilize the delicate repairs. He glared at his uncooperative patient.

"Pfft! Sideswipe? Listening to advice for his own good? Unlikely." Sunstreaker grumbled from the neighboring recharge slab.

Sideswipe stuck out his tongue at his spark brother.

After finessing Sideswipe's mangled vocalizer back into shape, Ratchet reattached Sunstreaker's severed left leg. Fortunately, they brought the original limb in with them. Ratchet wanted to operate on Sunstreaker's grievous injury first, but the idiot insisted on waiting until after his brother received care.

"Can it, you two!" Ratchet hissed. They were going to wake more patients and then he'd never get to First Aid in time. "My business is my own. Be quiet and I'll be back soon."

"Back? Where are you going?" Sideswipe rasped. He exchanged a nervous glance with Sunstreaker.

"To deliver some supplies, if you must know."

"You can't go out now! And definitely not alone." Sunstreaker struggled to get up.

"We'll come. Otherwise, Garou will get'cha." Sideswipe added, following his brother's lead.

"The what now?" Ratchet asked as he gently eased them both back down.

They settled back on to their recharge slabs without argument. A true testimony to the severity of their injuries and exhaustion.

"The Garou." Sunstreaker whispered. "He's cursed by Primus—"

"Let me stop you right there." Ratchet held up a hand. "Curses aren't real and neither is Primus. I've got nothing to worry about."

Sideswipe and Sunstreaker simultaneously sighed like Ratchet was the one spouting nonsense.

"He's totally real, Ratch! Kup told us all about him." Sideswipe wheezed.

"Great. If Kup said it, then it MUST be true." Ratchet rolled his optics.

"His name is Deadlock." Sunstreaker continued, undeterred by Ratchet's sarcasm. "He used to be a regular bot until he committed a terrible crime. As punishment for his evil deeds, Primus cursed him. He changed Deadlock's alt mode to a giant cyberwolf with a savage appetite, doomed to prowl the barren wastelands. Once a battle is over, no one can return to the field before the next sunrise or he'll shred you to pieces."

"And Kup didn't make up this "ghost" story just to keep you two from wandering out at night?" Ratchet made the air quote motion and raised a very skeptical brow.

"No way! We totally saw him once! If Sunny didn't pull me into a trench, he would have gotten us both." Sideswipe gasped.

Ratchet pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger to ward off the imminent headache. He was wasting time. Who knows how long First Aid could hold out. He needed to leave.

"It's true. I saw his eyes, Ratch. Burning red swirled with dark shadows. His plating was all sharp edges like even touching him would hurt. I've never seen anything like him. Ever. Of course, if I didn't have little Sides to worry about, I totally could have taken him down." Sunstreaker pounded his fist into his palm and cast a smug grin at his twin.

"Shut up! You ran away even faster than me!" Sideswipe retorted.

"Fine. I'll keep an optic out for the big bad Deadlock." Ratchet grumbled. "As long as you two promise to stay put."

"Deal! As long as you promise to take this!"

Sideswipe winced as he reached out to fasten a small chain strung with thirteen carved silver beads around Ratchet's wrist.

"What the frag is this?" Ratchet turned his wrist to examine the bracelet. The strange beads glowed in the dim light.

"I made it! If you see Garou, throw the beads at him!" Sideswipe grinned.

"He's afraid of jewelry?" Ratchet asked incredulously.

"No." Sunstreaker's laughter quickly devolved into a coughing fit. "There's thirteen beads. One for each of the original Thirteen Primes. Since Deadlock broke away from Primus, he can only count to twelve. He can't number all the Primes. Having thirteen objects will confound him and he'll stay all night trying to count them. So, you can safely escape!"

Ratchet glared at both of them. Of all the ridiculous, unscientific, absurd superstitions! But they smiled so proudly for giving him the "protection" beads, that he didn't have the spark, or the time, to explain everything that was wrong with their legendary Garou. Even if the whole thing was another one of Kup's tall tales, he was touched by their genuine concern.

"Thank you." He muttered instead of knocking their heads together.

"Be careful." Sideswipe whispered; his wounded vocalizer grated on Ratchet's audials like rusty nails.

"Always. Besides, I've got nothing to worry about." Ratchet jingled the beads around his wrist, shouldered his bundle of supplies, and slipped out the door.

Ratchet quietly crept through the base. He already wasted enough time with Sideswipe and Sunstreaker, he didn't need to be waylaid by anyone else. Lives were depending on these supplies.

He caught a glimpse of his reflection in a polished panel near the exit and grimaced. For the first time ever, he regretted washing up after surgery. A layer of dried energon would have dulled the white bits of his armor. He planned on keeping to the shadows, but his stark white gleamed in the darkness. He would present a bright shining target against the reddish terrain

Making a slight detour through the cargo bay, he grabbed a tattered tarp stained by rust dust off a stack of crates. He hastily draped it around his shoulders as a makeshift cloak. Without a second thought, he left the safety of the base and trudged into the deepening night.

Hiding from the sentries on duty, Ratchet took a moment to double check First Aid's coordinates against his map data and the inhospitable battlefield stretching out before him. His spark sank. Jagged shards of rust rose and fell in uneven intervals. Defensive trenches and artillery craters increased the roughness of natural cliffs and canyons. Mist pooled in the deepest pits. The most direct route took him right through the thick of it.

His ambulance alt mode will never be able to traverse this broken landscape. So much for a quick easy delivery run. The weight of his pack pressed down on his shoulders. Ratchet sighed, pulled his cloak closer, and forged ahead on foot.

The stars shimmered above, their untouchable light far above the destructive misery of broken boulders and spilled energon.

Quickly plotting a course that kept to the shadows, Ratchet picked his way down to the base of a towering cliff. He skidded on the loose scree, slid most of the way, and landed in a tumbled heap at the bottom. Rust dust billowed around him, fine grit working into every seam.

"Frag me," Ratchet grumbled, standing and snapping a dislocated elbow joint back into place. "The superstitious fools were right about one thing: a quadruped wolf monster would have a helluva lot easier time hopping around on these rocks than a beat-up old ambulance."

TSCHE-TSCHE-TK-Tk-tk

No sooner had he spoken; he heard the tell-tale whirling of a transformation cog. Ratchet clamped his hands over his mouth and pressed himself flat against the dark cliff wall. Cold radiated into his frame.

After agonizing seconds of silence stretched into minutes, Ratchet carefully surveyed the area, not detecting a single sign of movement. Although both armies had retreated from this battle to regroup, it didn't mean it was safe. After all, First Aid managed to collect a small band of survivors. Who's to say that there aren't bands of Decepticons roving through the darkness?

Memories of his last time in a POW torture camp came unbidden to his mind. Ratchet shuddered and shoved them away. For all Sideswipe and Sunstreaker's fears about Deadlock, the imaginary Primus-cursed Garou, far worse monsters lurked in the shadows of the universe.

Convincing himself that the sound was nothing more than a trick of his exhausted audials, Ratchet carefully continued on his way.

The uncomfortable sensation of being watched dogged Ratchet's every move. Several times he could have sworn he heard a soft footprint or two after he stopped walking. He shrugged it off as a bit of PTSD induced paranoia, which he didn't have time to deal with. Not when someone else needed him.

About halfway to First Aid's provided coordinates, Ratchet's low fuel warning pinged. He heard the raspy rumble of an engine running on fumes, which was odd because he didn't feel it. It was like the sound came from outside of his own body, from somewhere out in the shadows. He stumbled forward. The stubborn urge to keep moving gnawed at him. But his practical side won out. If his systems shut down now, the supplies would never get to their destination.

Ratchet tucked himself under a half-demolished rock formation. The swirling mist chilled his armor, but he was glad for the extra camouflage.

"Well... bottoms up," Ratchet mumbled to no one in particular as he lifted a canister of medical grade energon and took a small sip. Resisting the urge to knock the entire thing back in one gulp and be on his way, Ratchet forced himself to go slow. If he fueled too rapidly, he could flood his engine.

Slowly two crimson points of light took shape in the deepening darkness.

"Great. Now I'm seeing things," Ratchet huffed. Seeing wandering flashes of light was a common symptom of energon deprivation. Shaking his head at his own stupidity, Ratchet took another sip. He shouldn't have run himself so low on fuel.

Another growl echoed in the night.

"Relax. You'll have fuel soon enough." Ratchet patted his own tank and sipped his energon.

The red lights narrowed and the growling increased. Shadows condensed. Darkness coalesced around a single shape. The mist receded as a gigantic cyberwolf stalked directly towards Ratchet.

"Well, I'll be damned! I'm not the only one cold and miserable tonight." Ratchet grinned. He hadn't seen a wild cyberwolf in ages, and none as large as this one. Despite their frightening appearance, they rarely attacked anything larger than a petrol rabbit.

He rummaged through his supply bag until he found the rust sticks. He packed a few of the nutrient rich sweets in case of emergency. The sugar rush provided a substantial energy boost and warded off the pain of an empty tank. He unwrapped one and offered it to the snarling cyberwolf. The huge caninoid snapped and flinched away.

"Take it easy, buddy. We're so focused on our war, sometimes we forget Autobots and Decepticons aren't the only casualties. I'm sorry you got caught in our crossfire."

Ratchet waved the rust stick towards the cyberwolf. The poor thing was all taut cables and rusted panels. Although its optics burned bright red, shadows swirling with the light were a sure sign of malnutrition. The battle must have scared away or killed off its usual prey, although Ratchet had no idea how anything could survive in such harsh terrain.



The creature stalked back and forth, eyeing both Ratchet and the rust stick with rabid curiosity mingled with wary distrust. When Ratchet leaned a bit closer, it snarled, ferociously baring its saber fangs.

"Now, now, you poor little bastard. It's okay. They're perfectly safe. See?" Ratchet ate the first rust stick himself, savoring the warm rush through his empty tank. The cyberwolf's dull optics widened. It huffed in shock. Ratchet pulled out another one and offered it to the cyberwolf.

This time the creature snapped up the rust stick so fast it nearly took off Ratchet's fingers.

"Ha ha! There you go. They're pretty tasty. Do you like them?"

The massive caninoid crouched down and licked its chops, staring at Ratchet all the while.

"Want some more?" Ratchet asked as he held out another rust stick. "Mind my fingers this time."

To Ratchet's surprise the savage creature heeded his request, gently plucking the rust stick from his hand. It crunched the candy with pure delight.

"I'm not sure if I've ever had a stranger companion for a midnight snack." Ratchet chuckled as he slowly sipped his energon and fed the cyberwolf rust sticks one at a time until they were all gone. He felt himself growing drowsy and knew he had to move. "But all good things must come to an end."

Ratchet staggered to his feet, ignoring his creaking joints and general exhaustion. The cyberwolf growled and sprang backwards, sharp hackles raised down the entire length of its spine.

"Relax. I have to go." Only about half way through his energon cube, Ratchet set the remainder of it on the ground and nudged it towards the cyberwolf. He had enough fuel to make it the rest of his journey and this poor bastard needed all the help he could get. "It's not much, but it's better than nothing."

The cyberwolf's optics shifted between Ratchet and the cube of energon.

"Go ahead. It's all yours. Drink it slowly!"

Although Ratchet thought himself a bit crazy for giving fueling instructions to a starving animal, the cyberwolf followed his directions and slowly lapped up the energon.

Ratchet smiled. Even if he gets to First Aid's position too late, at least he was able to help someone tonight. He adjusted his makeshift cloak and slipped away into the shadows while the creature slowly savored his meal. Ratchet had barely gone two steps when cyberwolf leapt in front of him, all flared plating and bared fangs.

"Wait! Where are you going?" It snarled.

"Oh, frag me... The hallucinations are getting worse." Ratchet muttered. He dragged a palm down his face. "Optimus was right. I really should've taken that nap."

"Hallucinations?! What the hell are you talking about?" The cyberwolf wrinkled its snout. With the same distinct transformation sound that Ratchet heard earlier tonight, the creature's plating shifted until a ferocious bot rose before him. His sleek frame bristled with sharpened armor edged with rust. Deep gouges through fading purple paint marred his chest.

Ratchet snorted and then burst into laughter. The mysterious bot glared at him

"Let me guess. You're the dreaded Primus-cursed Garou!" Ratchet laughed. He double checked his fuel-deprived operational systems to make sure he wasn't headed for an involuntary shut down.

"The what?!" The bot's finials canted back as confusion overwhelmed his ferocity.

"I'm sorry. How rude of me. Perhaps you'd prefer to be called by your name: Deadlock." Ratchet chuckled. Things were getting ridiculous. He hadn't had such detailed exhaustion-induced hallucinations since the fall of Iacon.

"How did you know that?" Deadlock gasped. His crimson optics flared.

"Let's just say a little bot, or rather two little bots, told me."

"What kind of person are you?" Deadlock asked. He tilted his head to the side and studied Ratchet like he was attempting to decipher a tome of ancient Cybex. "I followed you all night. You are in rough shape, but nothing stops you. Nothing scares you. Not even me. And sometimes I scare myself!"

"I don't have time to be scared or tired when people are depending on me. I have to deliver medical supplies to my lost friends before trouble finds them."

"But- You gave me your energon! When you clearly need it yourself." Deadlock spat his words in accusation. He paced back and forth, keeping his optics fixed on Ratchet.

"It's no big deal to share." Ratchet shrugged. The further the conversation went; the less Ratchet was convinced it was a hallucination. The legendary Garou was berating him about his inconsistent fueling habits. His imagination wasn't this wild.

"Whoa! What are those?"

Ratchet followed Deadlock's line of sight and found him staring intently at the protection beads fastened around his wrist. His cloak shifted when he shrugged and the now exposed silver beads glowed soft blue in the starlight. A mischievous thought came to Ratchet's sleep-deprived mind.

"Carved beads." He held up his hand and grinned. The beads jingled. Deadlock's optics widened. "Can you tell me how many there are?"

To his complete shock, Deadlock's face lit up bright pink. He folded his arms and turned away.

"No! So I do not know how to count! So what?!" He huffed. Training his optics of the ground, he canted his finials back and flared his plating. "I never learned to read either. Gonna make fun of me for that too?"

"Relax, kid. Trust me, you'll know when I'm making fun of you. I can teach you to count, if you want. Look—" Ratchet extended his arm towards Deadlock and pointed to the luminescent beads one at a time, counting them out. "There's thirteen total. One for each of the original Primes."

"The thirteen Primes!" Deadlock repeated in awe. He reverently traced the carvings with a single claw. "They are from Primus? Then they are sacred!"

"Great. None of the legends about the fearsome Deadlock mentioned that you're a theologian. You are so much worse than the stories say." Ratchet rolled his optics.

"Now you are making fun of me!" Deadlock grinned, full of fangs and delight.

"Maybe a little." Ratchet smiled. He found himself enjoying this deeply weird conversation. The legendary Garou is real. Not as a divinely cursed ghoul but as a fairly regular bot with mysterious origins and a questionable belief system. He had yet to see anything to prove the existence of curses or Primus.

Ratchet unfastened the bracelet. When he reached out for Deadlock's hand, the fearsome bot flinched.

"Tell you what. A friend gave them to me for protection." Although he was never known for his tact, Ratchet purposely left off 'from you' at the end of his sentence. "You look like you could use a little protection yourself. Why don't you hold them for me?"

Deadlock stared at him.

"You would give me the SACRED Primus beads?"

"Not sacred, but yes." Ratchet got the distinct impression that Deadlock stressed the word 'sacred' specifically to annoy him.

"You cannot give me your protection. It's too special."

"I can do whatever I want."



Ratchet caught Deadlock's clawed hand and slipped the beads around his wrist. "Besides, you're pretty special too."

"I am... special?" Deadlock whispered softly, rapt in wonder at the beads shining on his wrist.

"Of course you~"

BRAKKA-BRAKKA-BRAKKA!!!

"Fragging hell! Gunfire!" Ratchet bolted. "It sounds like trouble found my friends before I did. Sorry, kid. I've got to go."

Ratchet raced through the darkness, desperately dodging around shadowy obstacles and tripping over those he didn't see. A pang of guilt lanced his spark for abandoning Deadlock in a rush. The poor kid must have quite the story to tell. Although chances were slim for all of them, Ratchet hoped Deadlock could find a happy ending.

Bright bursts of laser fire lit up the night. Shouts and screams shattered the eerie silence. Ignoring every warning screaming at his common sense, Ratchet ran directly towards the fray.

Skidding to a stop at the top of a low cliff, Ratchet froze. First Aid had a few survivors gathered at the mouth of a narrow canyon below him. They were pursued by a giant Decepticon wielding an energon axe. Each swing of the glowing weapon blazed blinding trails of light through the darkness. Despite the changes in his armor, the Decepticon was terrifyingly familiar.

Turmoil.

Even thinking the name sent a shockwave through Ratchet's system. Ratchet's engine raced as he shoved away the memories of abuse he suffered at Turmoil's hands during his time as a POW. He had to move before fear paralyzed him. Pulling his cloak close and hoping Turmoil didn't recognize him, Ratchet leapt into action.

Ratchet vaulted over the edge of the cliff and slid down the loose scree amidst the rising dust. His rust red cloak billowed as the mist swirled around him.

"CATCH! HERE'S THE SUPPLIES YOU NEED!" Ratchet shouted. He whipped the precious bundle with all his might directly at First Aid. "I'll handle this idiot! Get the wounded to safety!"

"WHAT THE HELL?!" First Aid's blue visor flared in shock. He nearly dropped his gun as he caught the bundle. "WHO-"

"GO!! GODDAMMIT!!!" Ratchet yelled. He threw himself between the Decepticon and the weary band of survivors.

"Y- YES SIR!" First Aid clutched the supplies to his chest and ducked into the shadows.

Ratchet drew his sidearm and shot Turmoil right in the face. He hollered as his left optic burst in a shower of sparks.

"You'll pay for that!" Turmoil bellowed, shifting his focus entirely to Ratchet. "I'll kill you!!"

"I'd like to see you try!" Ratchet taunted. The enraged Decepticon gave chase as Ratchet darted away. He caught a glimpse of First Aid hustling the survivors deeper into the shelter of the narrow canyon. Whatever happens, at least Ratchet knew they were safe.



The ground shook with Turmoil's every pounding footfall. Ratchet ran blindly. He really should have thought this plan through. While his mind raced through different solutions, he tripped and tumbled into a ditch. Slamming into the ground, Ratchet lost grip on his pistol. It skittered out of reach.

Ratchet scrambled in the dust for his gun even as a bright pink flash heralded the blow of the energon axe.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's dangerous to go out at night?" Turmoil sneered.

Ratchet shut his optics and made one last desperate lunge for his gun, knowing he wouldn't make it. The energon blade howled as Turmoil swung it forward with devastating force.

The blow went wide as Ratchet grabbed his gun. The axe dug into the ground at his side. He rolled over to find that it wasn't the blade that howled, but a massive cyberwolf. One with gleaming silver beads on his forepaw. Deadlock tackled Turmoil and clamped his saber fangs around his throat. He bit down with a sharp metallic crunch. Hot energon sprayed everywhere.

Deadlock sprung away, positioning himself in front of Ratchet. He crouched and snarled, energon dripping from his jaws.

"Deadlock? Heh... thought... you were dead..." Turmoil gurgled as energon poured from his wound. The light faded from his remaining optic.

Satisfied the threat was neutralized, Deadlock transformed. His optics frantically darted over Ratchet's frame.

"Are you hurt? I can't believe you took him on all by yourself!" Deadlock shouted.

"Don't fuss. I'm fine. I wanted to save my friends."

"Me too," Deadlock muttered softly. He wiped the energon from his face.

Ratchet sat up and surveyed the damage. He bashed one knee when he fell, but it's better than being in two pieces. Deadlock likely had more energon on his plating than in his fuel lines, but he took down the massive Decepticon like it was nothing. He was far stronger than he looked.

Seeing them together, Ratchet couldn't help but notice similarities between Deadlock and Turmoil's new modifications. Increased size, strength, razor sharp armor. Ratchet wondered if Turmoil had a quadruped alt mode as well.

"What about you? You okay? Tall, dark, and deadly implied he knew you."

"I am fine." Deadlock answered defiantly. He canted his finials back and absent-mindedly rubbed the scratches on his chest. "I'm not a Decepticon. Not anymore."

"You an Autobot?"

Deadlock shook his head.

"What then?"

"Actually... I'd like to follow you." Deadlock offered a fanged grin and a hand to pull Ratchet to his feet.

"ME?! Ha!" Ratchet laughed. He brushed the dust from his cloak. "You sure? I'm banged up, tired as hell, and absurdly lost. Staying with me is probably the worst possible thing you could do."

"I dunno." Deadlock shrugged. "Couldn't be any worse than what I have been doing."

"Which is?"

"I'm not entirely sure?" Deadlock winced. He sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. The beaded bracelet chimed softly. The uncertain gesture was endearingly at odds with his fearsome appearance. "My memories are a bit fragged up. To be honest, I was having trouble remembering my own name until you shared your rust sticks with me."

"What?!"

Ratchet's thoughts turned to snatches of a conversation with Prowl about an intercepted Decepticon transmission. Shockwave alluded to experimenting on loyal volunteers to create a group of unstoppable soldiers with enhanced abilities and fearsome alt modes specifically tailored for individual battlefield conditions. Prowl wanted Ratchet's opinion as a medical professional on the viability of the outlandish procedures. At the time, Ratchet laughed in his face.

"It's true!" Deadlock's face curled into a mischievous wolfish grin. "I guess your kindness broke my curse!"



"Bah!" Ratchet snorted. "Your body does its damnedest to keep you alive. In times of extreme starvation, limited resources are routed to essential operating systems at the expense of everything else. Your memories should return with proper medical care. There's no such thing as curses."

He adjusted the tension on his dented knee actuators and started the arduous process of limping back to base. Deadlock easily fell into step alongside him and warmth radiated through his exhausted circuits.

"You can't prove it. But I can't prove that curses DO exist either. Without the means to prove one reality over the other, does that mean I'm both cursed and not cursed at the same time?" Deadlock mused.

The long journey home passed in spirited debate about the juxtaposition of science and mysticism. A handful of candy and a bit of kindness worked wonders for Deadlock. He may have never learned to count, but his quick wit kept Ratchet on his toes. Sometimes literally, as Deadlock's lightning reflexes saved Ratchet from falling on his face several times.

The base was dead quiet when they returned before dawn. Almost everyone was deep in recharge. Ratchet shook the dust from his cloak and carefully stowed it in his tool kit. He didn't plan on ever using it again, but it's best to be prepared.

With any luck, at least two bots would still be awake. Ratchet winked and shared a wolfish grin with Deadlock, ready to put their prank into action. Ratchet slipped into the medibay. Deadlock shifted into his cyberwolf alt mode and padded softly behind him.

Ratchet hadn't even made it two steps before the twins accosted him.

"Hey! Ratch!" Sideswipe wheezed. "Did you see Red Rusting Hood?"

"Who?!" Ratchet glared at him.

"A wandering hero in a cloak forged from pure rust! First Aid told us all about him when he brought in a group of survivors! He appeared out of thin air, gave First Aid exactly what he needed and fought a giant con! Then he vanished into the night!" Sunstreaker answered.

"He totally saved their afts! So cool!" Sideswipe exclaimed.

"While I personally saw nothing of the sort, I suppose there's a bit of truth behind every legend." Ratchet innocently shrugged. "After all, didn't you tell me the Garou doesn't know how to count?"

Deadlock popped up and laid the borrowed beads on Sideswipe's chest.

"But I'm learning!" Deadlock flashed a fanged grin and wagged his tail.

Sideswipe gasped and Sunstreaker's optics went wide.

Ratchet burst into laughter. Deadlock transformed just in time to catch him as he doubled over when his wonky knee gave out. They tumbled to the floor, laughing together while the twins stared in shocked silence.

Deadlock grinned at him. Ratchet smiled. Although Ratchet never planned to become a legendary figure, at least he was in good company.



*In the beginning, my brightest luminary,*



*Which was also the end,*



*There were two, born as one.*

*They, who were then I, saw great suffering.*



*In their naive wisdom  
they sought to give their  
children gifts,*



*They, who were then I,*

*saw great rejoicing.*



*In their consummate  
sorrow-*



*Sought to take those gifts back.*





*In the end, my brightest  
luminary,*



*There was one,*



*who became two.*



# A Titan's Light Shines Darkest



Illustrator: InaliaKitsune



**W**hat do you know of the cities upon which we live? The cities wherein our histories lie. The cities wherein our greatest triumphs and failures were performed. The cities within which we've waged wars and raised heroes. The cities wherein we were born, and are expected to die. Were you aware that our cities are just as alive as we are?

What do you know of the Titans?

They were forged from Cybertron's matrix, emerging fully formed from deep within the planet's mantle, bursting through the silver crust and shaking the world quite literally to its core. The citizens, living in the dark age following the War of the Thirteen, saw these Titans that shook the world and expected further divine destruction like the kind that left them in shadow and squalor. But the Titans did not move to destroy, to crush them underfoot. Instead they transformed, turning into rolling collections of buildings and streets and then freely opened their gates to the destitute people.

The Titans, these Cityformers, took us in and safeguarded us. From them we learned our community, and upon our community did we build civilization. All of it, evolved on the backs of these benevolent beings. The Titans became our homeland, our very lifeline.

And they knew it.

For all intents and purposes these massive mechs were all powerful. As much as we developed, it was the Titans that guided us. They held wisdom and power far beyond our understanding.

Living in their walls, just as we were protected, we were at their mercy. If something was done that the Titans disapproved of, it would be ruined and the offending mechs summarily expunged.

Ultimately, the will of the Titans was absolute.

Even the Quintessons, those powerful techno-organics that enslaved Cybertron for millennia, could not defeat the Titans. They could only deceive them, force them into stasis, and hide them away.

It would be unthinkable to try and assert complete dominance over such a powerful being.

Did you know that the Decepticons tried?



When Soundwave first steps foot into the halls of the Titan, he nearly keels over from the pain. His chest pops open almost immediately, Ravage bursting out and worriedly at his side in an instant.

The telepath doesn't acknowledge his symbiont, for the bubble of acute pressure pushing against the edges of his processor disables his HUD and fills his vision with static. He barely feels the servos he knows are at the sides of head, clutching his helmet in a vain attempt of relieving some of the pain.

Soundwave can't even hear his own thoughts, for between the cacophony of pain and static there are strange, deafening voices ringing in his head.

*Cybertronians...lost...beloved...ungrateful...forgiven...telepath...*

And then it's over.

The pain fades. Little by little the warning pop ups in his visor disappear and his vision clears, letting Soundwave see Hook right in front of face with a scanner in his hand.

Soundwave flinches and Hook retracts, turning off the scanner and standing up. Soundwave doesn't remember falling. He looks to his side and sees Ravage, staring at him in distress.

He looks up to see Megatron also standing over him with Hook at his side giving his report, but his leader doesn't look at the medic as he speaks, his crimson gaze stuck squarely on Soundwave. Arms crossed and brow furrowed, outwardly he doesn't look any more agitated than usual, but Soundwave knows Megatron is concerned.

"My scans didn't pick up anything out of the ordinary about his frame," Hook reports. "No radiation, armour damage, or protoform strain that I could see."

"Then what could have caused such a reaction?" Megatron demands.

"Psychic...interference." Soundwave interjects. "Have never felt a presence so...powerful, before."

"Ah," Hook says. "Outlier brain stuff. I can't do anything about that. Uhh, take it easy I guess. Or whatever it is you do."

::Helpful as always:: Ravage growls. His carrier doesn't disagree.

As Soundwave begins to get up, Megatron steps forward.

"Are you still fit for this task?" He asks, arms uncrossed.

"He'd better be!" A familiar screech mixed with the sounds of jet thrusters echoes from down the hall. There's the sound of transformation, a landing, and Starscream saunters into view.

"This Titan could be the key to absolute Decepticon domination but without a psychic link to wake it, this *Titan* might as well be another mountain on the horizon! And unless you know of any Decepticons with a telepathic outlier ability, then we will have no way of controlling it!"

"And you are certain that it cannot be controlled through other means?"

Starscream rolls his eyes, clearly unimpressed with the apparent foolishness of the question. "What do you think we've been doing here all this time? Shockwave's been down here too—"

"Mining for resources." Megatron interjects.

"And researching a way to stir the Titan since no one else seems to want to help," Starscream snaps back, a gesture which prompts Megatron to glare at his Second with unhidden malice. The Seeker shrinks back.

Megatron grunts. "What of that Titan Master you reported had been apprehended. Is he truly incapable of waking it?"

"If he is not then I command his will," Starscream retorts. "We've put him through the wringer, and yet he stays clamped up."

Starscream pauses. "He says the Titan will not allow him to discuss such things with the likes of us."

"Then the Titan is awake?" Megatron wonders.

Starscream purses his lips. "Well that's the thing—it's not. This bot is clearly delusional after so many cycles trapped here. It truly is unfortunate that we've had to add yet more pain to his existence, but some things simply cannot be helped. Come along then my Lord. Soundwave. I will take you to him."



They stomp through the corridors of a myth. With every hefty step, sound bounces from massive wall to massive wall, travelling down further the seemingly endless corridor and into the dark void far beyond the lights these mechs carry. Looking up towards the ceiling that even Devastator wouldn't be able to reach, none of the roaming Decepticons have ever felt smaller.



For a so called Cityformer, this doesn't look much like a city. Starscream is leading them through a dark and vast labyrinth that resembles the catacombs beneath Tyger Pax. They're ominous, coupled with the thick humidity none of it bodes at all well.

The deeper they travel into the Titan, every step Soundwave takes becomes slightly more laboured. Nothing debilitating, but his joints stiffen and his cooling fans get faster.

Soundwave feels an alien pressure enfolding his processor. It doesn't ache, but Soundwave is not at all pleased with the feeling—like there are hands carefully embracing his mind and trying to sift through it.

Ravage, who has stayed at his side since first ejecting, senses his carrier's distress.

::You okay?:: He asks.

::Yes:: Soundwave replies. ::Just...hot::

::Don't overexert yourself, Soundwave. Remember, Starscream said they can't do this without you.::

::Affirmative.::

As they near their destination, Megatron wonders, "Does it live up to your research, Starscream?"

"It is everything I've studied and more," Starscream sighs. "This being will serve us well."

"Us?" Megatron chuckles dryly. "How magnanimous of you Starscream."

"I do aim to please Lord Megatron."

They arrive at a large pair of doors. Starscream seems to put all of his weight into pushing them open. Copious amounts of dust fall as they do, and the Seeker is visibly strained from that exertion of effort.

"I hadn't realized I was the Champion of Kaon's doormech," Starscream pants.

Megatron smirks. "Well I would never ask for such a thing, but the gesture is welcome and effort always appreciated Starscream."

Soundwave and Megatron cut past him before he can get another word in, entering a confined space where Shockwave has fashioned a makeshift workstation on one side, and a small bot chained to the wall on the other side.

Shockwave greets them with a dip of his helm. "Lord Megatron. Soundwave."

Megatron acknowledges him with a nod, and then gets straight to business. "Shockwave, how fare your efforts within the Titan?"

As Shockwave gives his report, Soundwave finds his attention drawn to the bot on the opposite side of the room.

He examines the battered little mech. There are torn wheels on his shoulders, and his armour is a poor, faded facsimile of blue. At the edges of his face are glass shards that imply he had worn a visor at some point, but it's been broken and where there should be optics, are instead a pair of two ragged voids.

"He had weapons stashed everywhere," Starscream says when he catches Soundwave staring. "And a little light guiding his way. So I took it away—the light, and his sight. For good measure."

"A waste," Shockwave chimes in.

Soundwave pays them no heed, as the chained bot lifts and turns his head. It looks like this optic-less mech is staring at the carrier.

"I-it's you," he rasps. "Telepath."

"Oh NOW you're talking?" Starscream exclaims.

"He w-wants...you."

"Who?" Soundwave hears himself asking before he can even think.

"Trypticon."



All powerful and omnipotent within their realm, influencing the people within them, the thoughts of Titans were unknowable. However at the very least, they could be interpreted. The Cityspeakers were created, boons from Primus Themself—because what else could they be—to provide a proper bridge between the Titans and their citizens. They dove into the minds of Titans and shared their thoughts. Truly intimate bonds were forged between these Cityspeakers and Titans, built upon empathy and trust, the Cityspeakers were the only beings alive capable of even comprehending even a fraction of a Titan's unknowable will.

Many fancy titles and incredible stories about these bots that were essentially just interpreters. The Cityspeakers would never pretend that they had any type of power over the Titans. They could speak with them, directly relay the grievances of the people, even voice their opinion, and sometimes due to the deep bond between City and Speaker, a Titan could be swayed and even convinced of a different judgement. They knew and cared for the Titans better than anyone, and thus, knew better than anyone that Titans could not be commanded.

Titans cannot be made to do anyone else's will. No one commands a Titan. The concept is inconceivable. Attempts to perform such a colossal feat is nothing short of folly born from mad hubris.



With a bulky crown fastened tight around his helm, Soundwave sits upon a throne of cables and plugs. Shockwave adjusted the Titan Master cockpit to accommodate Soundwave and rewired the seat to integrate the complex wiring of a cortical psychic patch. The Titan Master is also there, Shockwave comparing his compatibility with the machinery to adjust it for Soundwave. The broken title bot is a really depressing sight to see.

Shockwave hooks yet another cord into Soundwave's headset.

Rumble whistles. "You lookin' like Solus Prime there boss, with all those cables comin' outta your head."

"Soundwave: Does not recall the cortical psychic patch being this...cumbersome."

Shockwave fiddles with something at the back of Soundwave's head. "Most Cybertronian processors are not this cumbersome. Trypticon's hardware is not just large, it is unlike any brain modules I have ever come across."

"Heh. And we all know you've held a lotta brains in your hands Shockers."

Shockwave ignores the minibot and types something into the panel. "I cannot guarantee that this connection will be as stable as the normal patch. If anything at any point appears unsound, disengage immediately."

"Don't you worry Shock! 'Wave's only ever sound!"

Soundwave pays Frenzy no mind, answering Shockwave with a brief, "Acknowledged. Soundwave: ready."

"Very well."

There's a click. "Initiating patch in 3...2...1—" And Soundwave is knocked offline.

Awareness returns to him with burning pain and crushing pressure. Soundwave opens his 'optics' to find himself in a hurricane of colour and consciousness. Fractals of thought shoot through him like bullets, threatening to disrupt his balance and rendering him listless debris in the raging current of consciousness. Soundwave forces himself to remain "grounded", although there is no such thing to speak of in this realm. There is no ground, no sky, no up, no down, just the hopeless illusion of solidity amongst the crystal like fragments of colour that surround him and swirl past. He catches a glimpse into the depths one of these colours, and his mind nearly drowns in memories that extend far beyond the extent of his own sordid existence.

There is no single point, no focus. When normally trying to achieve mental dominance Soundwave would hunt down the centre of the mind and unbalance it, dismember its focus and assert Soundwave as the absolute dominant consciousness. From there he could Trypticon's mindscape is a fractured mess of memories, disjointed consciousness and sheer will, and Soundwave is in danger of being completely subsumed by the torrent and lost.

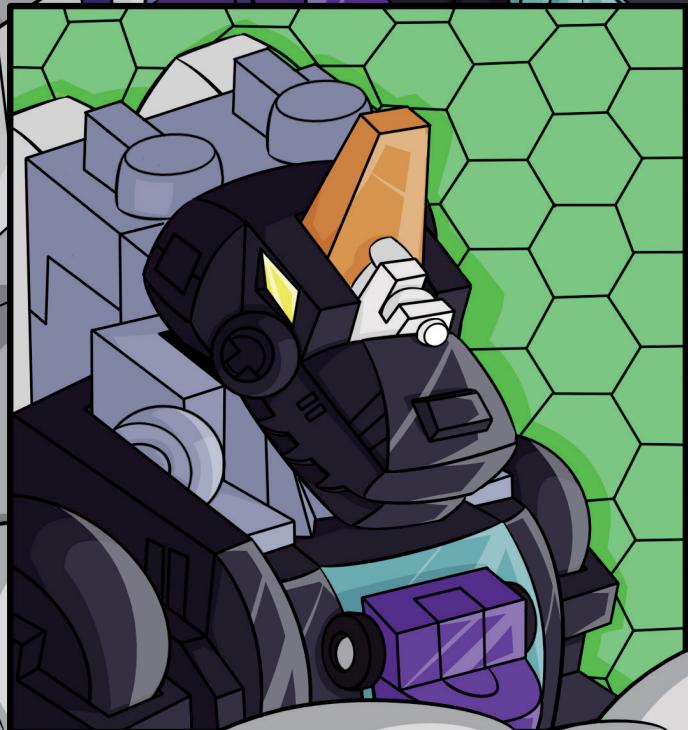
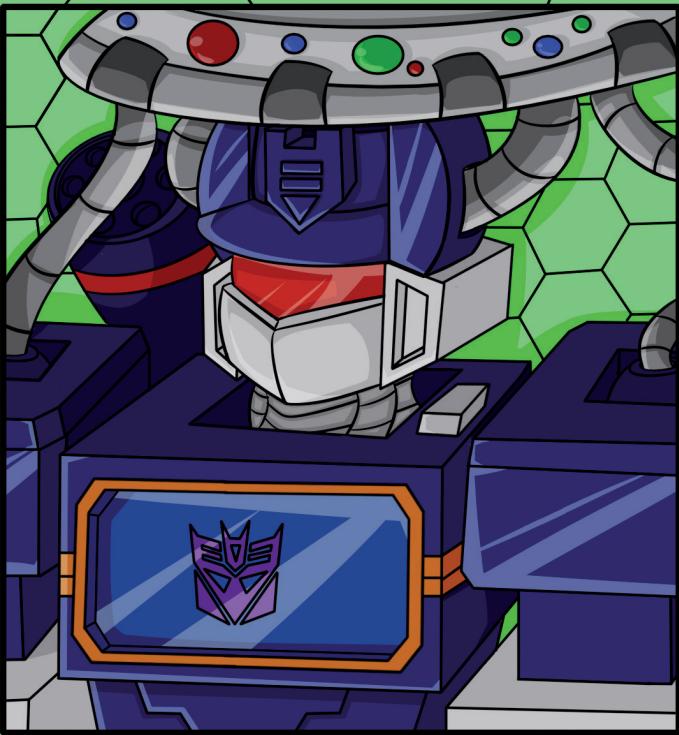
The Titan has gone completely, and utterly mad.

And then Soundwave takes pause. He clenches his fists, metaphorical though they may be in the psychic plane, and realizes—

*I am the only focused thing here.*

If there is no focal point for Soundwave to find and defeat, then he will become the focal point and take the lead. Easier said than done of course. Focusing solely on his own self, Soundwave begins to wade through the maelstrom.







The Titan could turn the tide of the War for good.

*Allow me to guide you.* Soundwave thinks, but his voice sounds odd.

More than just ending the war, its strength could lead to a new world order.

*You are broken. Let me heal you.* The voice continues to sound less and less familiar.

With Trypticon at their side, the Decepticons could completely remake Cybertron.

*Cybertron and beyond, beloved one.* Those words just materialize in Soundwave's thoughts.

With him the whole universe could be attainable. Trypticon is...all powerful.

**And I shall trust you, dear focused one.**

*Soundwave.*

And then Soundwave's mind goes white as the maelstrom suddenly dispels and everything becomes clear all at once.

Soundwave can...feel Trypticon. The telepath can still tell the difference between himself and the body of the Titan, but it's like Soundwave is wearing a suit. A massive and very very heavy suit. He can feel the limbs, the claws and joints. He feels how constrained and stiff the behemoth is underneath all the rock. And he can also sense how Trypticon is supposed to transform. Soundwave can also sense—but somehow he also knows that it's only a fraction—Trypticon's power.

But most of all, Soundwave feels so...small...

...He opens his optics back in his physical body. Smoke fills the space of the Titan Master cockpit. Most of it comes from the patch mechanisms Soundwave's attached too, but a good portion of it rises from Wipe-Out's chassis.

Even though he's surrounded by pounding alarms, his fretting cassettes and recovering from the patch, Soundwave somehow hears the dying bot's weak final words clear as crystal. "Ah...at last..." the ancient Titan Master mutters. "Trypticon has...no need of me...anymore..."



Once Soundwave became accustomed to the Titan's mind and Trypticon was firmly under his control—or as firmly as inspired confidence amongst High Command—preparations for his transformation went underway.

Excavations take much longer than anyone would have wanted, but in that time Trypticon had become a new base for the Decepticons working on him, Starscream and Shockwave among them. In between the work, mechs were quickly becoming accustomed to and very comfortable living in the cityformer, many of them visibly loathe to leave whenever orders demanded them elsewhere.

Shockwave especially, who'd found his niche in exploring the Titan and mining for any old technologies to be used. The scientist gradually becoming more obsessed with the Titan and what he could offer, spending practically every moment of everyday traversing through the labyrinth.

One day Soundwave comes across Shockwave in a still undeveloped section of the Titan's labyrinth. It's a long and barren corridor so dark, Soundwave could have walked right past it assuming it was a wall if it weren't for Shockwave's presence.

Odd. Shockwave doesn't usually keep his field so open and...vulnerable.

"Shockwave." Soundwave says.

His voice echoes through the black hall yet Shockwave shows no sign of acknowledging even the telepath's presence. The scientist continues to stand stock still and stare down into the empty void before him. Soundwave walks towards him. "Shockwave."

Still nothing.

There's something wrong. His field is incredibly dull. Soundwave is right behind Shockwave's shoulder when he tries again, "Shock—"

"I will set up my new laboratory here." Shockwave says suddenly, raising his arm to point into the inky dark. "This place holds one of the greatest points of power flow in all of Trypticon. He led me here, and this place will serve me well."



"He? Led you?"

Shockwave doesn't answer.

Soundwave wonders numbly when everyone started referring to Trypticon as "him".



With Soundwave at the helm, and the Titan finally excavated, Trypticon's transformed went underway. It was an arduous process, one Soundwave could feel within the vantage point of Trypticon's mind. Millions of years spent buried, unmoving and unconscious made every realigning joint and shifting circuit a truly unpleasant ordeal, and would go on to inflict awe inspiring destruction upon the Autobots.

For a few good months anyway.



The Titans are indestructible, the mightiest sentient beings to ever grace the face of Cybertron. Not just in their size, but in their construction. They are made of an alloy that otherwise does not seem to exist upon the face of Cybertron, and thus no Cybertronian made weapons can pierce it.

There was once an uprising, by mechs that sadly did not live within a Titan. They'd professed that living under a Titan's grace was unnatural. That the mighty cityformers poisoned free will.

They raised arms against a cityformer named Metrotitan. Utilizing subterfuge and schemes, these bots attempted to destroy Metrotitan's brain module from the inside.

Those who Metrotitan did not kill or expel, had by the end realized their folly and happily joined the Titan citizens.



Trypticon heads towards Tarn. He's already decimated Helex, left a crater in kalis, slaughtered hundreds of thousands, and is now making a beeline for the centre of Decepticon power on Cybertron. The Decepticons had enjoyed watching the Titan destroy Autobot settlements for them, but needless to say, being on the other end was not any fun.

All attempts to stop him—or at the very least, slow him down—have been fruitless. No matter how much firepower or warriors are thrown at him, the Titan merely walks through it all, swatting and destroying many of the forces sent after him.

They need to stop Trypticon, and evidently the only way to do this is to trap him again.

Such was the decree of Megatron. A decree which has been met with a surprising—to Megatron, anyways—amount of resistance.

A number of Decepticons, most of whom had been stationed within Trypticon when he was still under some control, made their displeasure with the order known. Verbal concerns and general outrage ripple through these mechs, but they represent only just less than a third of the larger Decepticon army and thus even their combined umbrage held little sway over the rest.

However the loudest protesters of this idea ended up being Starscream and Shockwave, much to Megatron's consternation.

"We can't just abandon him!" Starscream screeched. "We've worked too hard with him, Trypticon can't just be tossed to the wayside!"

"I concur," Shockwave says, not early as bombastic as Starscream of course, but there is an edge to his usually monotone voice that implies some...emotion from the scientist. "Trypticon is far too valuable—"

"ENOUGH!" Megatron booms. "How valuable to the Decepticons can the Titan be if the Decepticons cannot control it! Explain that logic to me, Shockwave!"

There is a silent moment, and Soundwave sees Shockwave stall and his optic reset. His head twitches downwards and then he says, "There...is none, my Lord."

Similarly, Starscream furrows his brow, clearly trying to make sense of his argument as well. "Trypticon is..."

"Trypticon is a loose cannon too powerful for its own good. One that must be dealt with. I cannot begin to comprehend what sort of...affection for the Titan clouds your judgement," Megatron says, looking pointedly at Shockwave. "But Trypticon will be eliminated whether either of you *approve* or not. Now get out and screw your heads on straight, or I will place the both of you beneath the Titans feet."

With a slightly confused salute, the two lieutenants about face and exit the room, leaving Megatron and Soundwave alone.

"What do you make of that, Soundwave?"

The Decepticon leader is met with silence, and he whips himself around with a furious grimace.  
"Soundwave!"

The mech in question, who had up until that point kept his gaze downcast and not really paying attention, cliches his head up to look at his leader.

Megatron squints, looking his TiC up and down. "It seems as though delving into the Titan's mind has affected you more than you've claimed. And then there's the rest, who do not even have that excuse, yet act as if that raging monstrosity is a sublime avatar of Primus! What happened to all of you within Trypticon?"

Soundwave shakes his helm. "Nothing...unknown."

Megatron's frown deepens. "You are either delusional, or lying. Do not lie to me, old friend."

"Affirmative. Soundwave: is not lying."



The plan is deceptively simple: lure Trypticon into the Manganese Mountains and bury him beneath one. Or two, if need be. They're lucky that Trypticon is already close enough to the mountain range, but it's the luring that's complicated. Trypticon barely pays any heed to the bots around him. He usually just swats at them as if they were flies. The only surefire way of getting the Titan's attention, is to get inside his head—literally.

And there is only one mech on all of Cybertron who can perform such a feat.

Soundwave hasn't entered Trypticon's mind since the Titan went rogue. Trypticon wouldn't let him. But now, as he grows closer to the Titan in his ship, he gets a feeling that this time, he'd be allowed in.

From his time in Trypticon's mind Soundwave can remember small access points, meant as exits in case of emergency, but would serve his purpose of sneaking inside well enough.

...huh. He could have shared this information long ago. Why didn't he?

*Because it would compromise Trypticon.*

Of course, but is that not what Soundwave wants? Is that not what he is doing right now? Compromising Trypticon to stop his rampage?

It is...isn't it?

Soundwave allowed only Ravage to accompany him on this mission, but now at the threshold, the carrier wills his compatriot to stay with the ship. Ravage emerges from Soundwave's chest, confused.

"Ravage: will remain here."

"What?"

"Ravage," Soundwave repeats. "Will remain here."

"Not a chance. You'll need help operating the patch, and what if something goes wrong? You'll need someone to pull you out."

"Nothing will go wrong."

Ravage is thoroughly unconvinced.

"Trypticon will not approve of Ravage's presence. It will be best for Soundwave to undertake this mission alone."

The beastformer's optics narrow. "How do you know what Trypticon would and wouldn't approve of?"

The carrier doesn't answer. He simply turns around, and begins to open the bay doors.



"Being in the Titan's mind has changed you Soundwave," Ravage continues. "It's altered you, affected your mind somehow. And before it was insane! Fractions of its true self, but now? I am concerned—no, I am afraid, Soundwave. Of what will happen to you if you compete with its mind at full clarity."

"Trypticon: will not bring harm to Soundwave."

"But how do you know—"

"Ravage," Soundwave snaps. His symbiont flinches. Is that...fear? On Ravage's face? Fear of Soundwave? He hadn't meant to—

Soundwave loosens up and tries to assuage Ravage through their bond. "Apologies, Ravage. Please...trust in me." The door lands on the metal with a dull thump, and Soundwave walks down that ramp alone. Ravage, remaining on the ship.

"If you're not back within the hour, I'm calling for backup and coming in after you!"

"Affirmative."

"Don't lose yourself in that monster, Soundwave."



The entrance is mercifully close to the Titan Master cockpit.

Or perhaps, Trypticon made some changes to the layout in order to accommodate Soundwave. Either way, he didn't have to walk far to reach his destination.

He reaches the cockpit within minutes, the patch still in tact and connected to the seat. As Soundwave powers it on and sets everything up, he goes over his plan. It will take a lot of misdirection and deception.

But hey, they're not called Decepticons for nothing.

With a small smile behind his mask Soundwave fastens the headpiece onto himself, and lets the patch transfer his mind into Trypticon's. The moment he becomes conscious again, there is a rumbling focused around Soundwave, and suddenly there's a wall blocking his path.

*No, he realizes swiftly. That is not a wall.*

He looks up, seeing Trypticon's bipedal form, towering over him as though it were real.

Soundwave grows—or perhaps Trypticon shrinks, it's hard to tell in this space—and suddenly Soundwave is on equal footing with the ancient being.

Trypticon's psychic form lunges at Soundwave, and Soundwave meets him in the middle. The two hulking bots grapple one another. The space around them distorting as their wrestling turns into boxing, and they begin to throw each other around the metaphorical space.

Soundwave punches Trypticon's beastial face, sending him reeling back. It's an incredible feeling. To be here not just standing alongside this Titan but fighting him and gaining the upper hand. It's invigorating. The grey beneath him making him feel like a god in the heavens.

*Is this what it feels like? Being a Titan?*

He doesn't let Trypticon answer as he sends his foot flying into the centre of his chassis. The moment the hit lands, Soundwave feels Trypticon's grip over his physicality waver, and he is thrust back to the reality of his actual mission.

Splitting his attention between combat and his other task, Soundwave carefully undermines Trypticon's weakening control. Thank Primus he was already so close to where they wanted him to be, because all Soundwave needs to do is change his trajectory. Soundwave carefully and quietly wills Trypticon's body to turn.

Soundwave's own attention slips for a moment, allowing the phantom Trypticon to gain the upper hand in their brawl. His tail swipes a long arc through the air and towards Soundwave's legs, sweeping the telepath off his feet.

This dance continues for what feels like ages. Between trying to control Trypticon's body and battling his mind, Soundwave grows more exhausted by the moment. However, he does not relent for even a moment in either struggle. He cannot afford to, or else the consequences could be even worse than the cities already destroyed in Trypticon's wake.

On and on they go, until the strain Soundwave was exerting to control Trypticon lessened. For a moment he thought he had suddenly grown stronger, but then he realized it was because the resistance he was fighting had all but vanished. Startlingly, Trypticon is walking towards the Manganese Mountains of his own volition.

**You are worthy.**

*...what?*

**I had grown concerned that you were not strong enough to handle this responsibility, but I am most please to see that you are.**

*And what responsibility would that be?*

**The Cityspeaker responsibility.**

Before Soundwave can even comprehend the meaning of that statement, he is thrown back and pinned to the ground by an invisible force. He raises his helm as much as he can to see that Trypticon's mind avatar has disappeared.

He feels Trypticon's physical body still moving, and he sense that he is still walking into the trap the Decepticons have set for him. But...why?

**I am nothing if not generous Soundwave**, a deep, haunting voice resonates throughout the space—or perhaps simply within the recesses of Soundwave's mind. **especially to my most beloved servants.**

*I do not serve you!*

**Oh but you do. Your mind is strong, you gave mine enough rest and my body the necessary rehabilitation to become fully functional again. I am so grateful to you, Soundwave, so I will do this for you.**

*You will be trapped again.*

**Oh yes. But not for too long. I trust you will see to that.**

*Negative! I came here to be rid of you.*

**Negative**, he parrots with a chuckle. **You came back to fulfill your new purpose and truly bond with me.**

Soundwave struggles, thrashing against the invisible restraints that hold him down.

Trypticon sighs. **But, if you still believe otherwise, then I suppose we can spare some time to relieve you of those delusions.**



The plan goes off without a hitch.

Trypticon steps between two of the mountains, both of which have been rigged to all Pit and detonate at the same time. The ensuing blast throws the Titan off balance and shaking the world. Pieces fly into Trypticon, hitting his face and piercing his joints, the massive rocks pushing him downwards and burying him beneath.

Soundwave, who had returned to his ship with nary a scratch on him, watches the show with Ravage.

"Soundwave," Ravage whispers. "Is that you?"

"Affirmative."



What do you know about the Titans? Do you know of their bottomless, undying love for us? Of their kindness and mercy to even the most ungrateful bots? It is their purpose—their Primus given purpose—to take care of the people of Cybertron. Whether that means housing us, punishing us, or simply guiding our people in ways we may never understand. But even the Titans have ambitions. Goals even they need aid in achieving. Some ask less of others, but ultimately, the relationship between Titan and citizen is one of reciprocity. We must give back to the Titans that give us so much.

And to Trypticon, who now serves dutifully as our moving citadel, the Decepticons will in turn give him Cybertron—and all the stars beyond







NORRU  
ANNA  
2021



# Tinposie Row



By: Wallflowers

Illustrator: Lyndaxy



Gasket should probably consider himself fortunate that he hasn't had reason to come down here before now. Given the current circumstances, he doesn't feel very lucky. Not that there's much luck to go 'round these days... not in the Dead End. Sewer water sloshes around his pedes, acidic from the runoff of the nearby energon processing plant, the gunk working its way into his seams as he navigates through the dark.

"Don't 'member you being so damn heavy," Gasket grunts, readjusting his grip on the limp frame slung over his shoulder. "You're a *speedster*. Where'd you find enough energon to be *heavy*?"

Gasket's pedes slip on the damp concrete. He smacks a hand on the wall to steady himself, and takes the opportunity to peer into the darkness of the tunnel ahead of him. There is little to be seen in the din. The distant sound of run-off rattles in the hollow space.

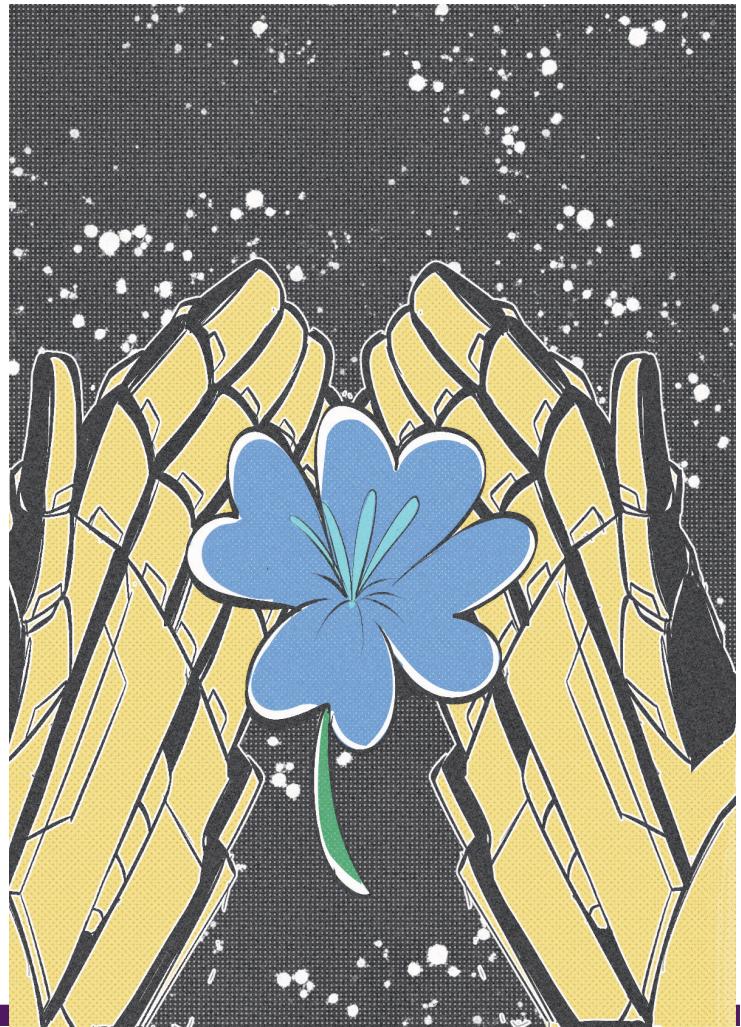
"Pinprick better have given me the right directions," he groused, steadily picking his way to the through the sewer tunnel. "Of all the times for him to be..."

He spots a smaller off-shooting tunnel, resting higher in the wall, free of the low level of trickling greywater that Gasket has been slogging through. He hefts the frame up onto the tunnel's lip, then hauls himself up. Slinging the weight over his shoulder once more, he continues walking. The faint glow of a light glimmers from the far end. The remaining half of a rusted metal grate lines the top of the channel's opening, looking out over...

Well. Gasket isn't certain what he expected.

With its curved walls and vaulted ceiling, the cistern that is Tinposie Row is as close to a holy hall as can be found in the Dead End. Tinposie Row has long since been dry — Gasket isn't certain if it had ever been used for sewage, or if someone had built it to protect this place. City light trickles weakly down from the grate set in the ceiling, illuminating the dust motes that hang heavy in the stale air. Gasket peers up, but can't see anything beyond the yellowed clouds of pollution that might tell him where he is. He thinks that for the most part, the cistern looks like any other abandoned infrastructure project — it isn't very remarkable.

The flowers are.





Gasket has seen tinposies before. The necrotic flowers grow in abundance in the Dead End. Given the name, he expected to find some down here, but nothing like this. There must be *thousands*, the delicate grey blooms covering every inch of the cistern floor. It's beautiful — and a staunch signal that Gasket stands in a graveyard.

*A hot spot*, he sternly reminds himself. The un-ignited sparks are somewhere down there, buried in the fecund ground beneath the blooms. *They* are the reason he is here.

"Guess there's worse places you could be left," Gasket comments.

Tightening his grip on the limp mech, he looks around for a way to get down from the mouth of the sewage pipe he stands in and into the cistern proper. He finds none, and resigns himself to carefully hopping down the few feet. Tinposies crunch beneath his pedes as he lands. The dead weight of the frame slung over his shoulders throws his balance off, dragging him down with it. He lands amid the smog of sewer gas and a burst of grey petals.

"Slag! Slag..." Gasket sits up, still holding onto the frame that now lies half across him. "Sorry 'bout that."

His words trail off as he looks around. Being closer to them, the mounds the tinposies rise and fall over take on a more familiar shape — the silhouettes of mechs who'd been laid to rest here before. The flowers have taken root in their

greying frames, covering them completely as they feast on the *sentio metallico*. The closest mech lay a few paces away, undoubtedly laid to rest here recently. The flowers haven't quite covered him yet. Gasket can see the mech's face, the empty eye sockets staring directly at him.

Gasket looks away, focusing his attention back onto the frame he holds; not quite grey yet, but steadily working its way there.

Stray. His friend.

"Looks like you'll fit right in," Gasket states. He picks himself up off the ground and hefts Stray back over his shoulder with some difficulty.

*It's for the newsparks*, Stray had told him, when Gasket first heard of someone being buried here. Tinposie Row wasn't the most fertile hot spot to begin with, too poisoned by the industrial waste that had seeped down here — pair that with the misfortune of being *here*, the newsparks seemed damned to fail. At some point, someone began leaving grey-frames down here in hopes that the newsparks would absorb the unused *sentio metallico* upon ignition; with it, maybe the newsparks would be able to survive life in the Dead End.

Gasket hopes so.

He edges his way around the perimeter of the cistern carefully. He can't see the sparks beneath the blanket of tinposies. Primus forbid he *steps* on one. Gasket pauses, trying to find a safe place to lie Stray's body down, before giving up and carefully lowering him to the ground, figuring that as long as he is careful the weight shouldn't hurt any of the sparks *too* badly.

"Gonna have to learn to take a hit down here anyway," Gasket murmurs as he adjusts Stray's frame to lie comfortably on the ground. Leaning back, he lets himself take one last look at his friend. The grey has fully set in now, dulling out the once-white plating and sweeping from the curve of his prominent finials to the heavy browplate, across his sharp cheekbones and full mouth. Golden optics that Gasket fondly remembered sparkling with mirth so often are dark and lifeless. Gasket covers them with his hand, unable to bear looking at them for any longer.

"Sleep well, Stray," he mutters.



Tinposie Row ignites, to mixed reception.

Some of the Dead Enders are delighted. Some, resentful. It's in the backs of all of their minds, that with the rise in population the newsparks bring, there comes more competition for what little resources there are to be found.

Gasket doesn't think much of it. He's too busy trying to keep everyone alive, safe, and out of the Enforcers' sights. Sweetalker, Fuse, Pinprick, Scrimp... they rely on him. They *trust* him. Gasket is all to aware of being the one 'in charge' of their little group, and the responsibility it places on him. They can't afford there to be another accident.

He hears the rumors, about the mechs coming out of Tinposie Row. Gasket doesn't give them any weight. The dead don't walk, he tells himself.



"Kinda figured it wasn't gonna ignite," Scrimp says. "I mean, we all pretended it would, but... come on, a *hot spot* down *here*? Never thought it'd happen."

Across the table, Sweetalker regards the chips on the table, plucks a card from his hand, and slaps it face-down.

"Hard to not feel like somethin' was gonna go wrong," he agrees as he leans back.

It's a quiet night — a rarity. Gasket can't recall the last time they'd had one of these. While he's satisfied to simply live in the moment, the others have always been more fond of gossip than him.

"Wait, you haven't heard?" Pinprick leans in conspiratorially, cards barely covering his mischievous grin. "Somethin' *did*. Those ain't newsparks comin' outta Tinposie Row. It's the *shamblin' dead*."

Sweetalker grimaces at him. "Cut the scrap, an' take your turn."

"No, no, I'm bein' serious," Pinprick presses. He draws a card, then swaps it with another. "I *saw one*. You 'member Rebar? I ran into him yesterday — upright, warm, and walkin', easy as that. Not a spot of grey to be seen."

"You've been smokin' too much dross. It was probably just his batch mate or somethin'. The dead don't walk."

"*I'm* smokin' too much dross?" Pinprick snaps.

"If it *was* him, then we're all screwed." Fuse quips, interrupting the fight that's brewing. "Finally gettin' some rest when you're dead? So much for that!"

They all laugh, Gasket included. It isn't funny, which is why it is.

"Of course they'd figure out how to screw us outta the one thing we had left!" Pinprick barks, prompting another bout of dark humored laughter.

"Wait, wait-wait-wait. You're tellin' me you're actually buyin' this scrap?" Sweetalker turns and casts a pleading look at Gasket. "You brought Stray down to Tinposie Row just recently."

Gasket clears his vocalizer of the cloying, expired energon stuck in his throat. "Yeah."

"What do you think?"

"I think—" Pause for effect, then with a tilt of the hand, "—that I won this round."



It's near the end of a long shift when Gasket finds him, cowering in the alleyway that runs along the warehouse wall, curled in on himself and holding his helm. In his lack of recharge, Gasket almost forgets that this is *wrong*, that the mech in front of him should be *dead*.

He's only known one person to have such prominent finials. Delicate. White.





Gasket sets aside the crate he's supposed to bring to the loading bay and crouches down before the mech. Carefully, he reaches out.

"Stray?"

The mech looks at him and recoils in fear. The expression is wrong on Stray's face.

"D-don't hurt me," he pleads, his voice small.

Gasket snatches his hand away as though he's been burnt.

"You're not Stray."

The frame shakes its head, still staring at him with wide optics, tense and prepared to flee at any moment.

"I'm sorry," Gasket says, forcing the bitter disappointment down.  
"I'm Gasket. You're... new, right? What's your name?"

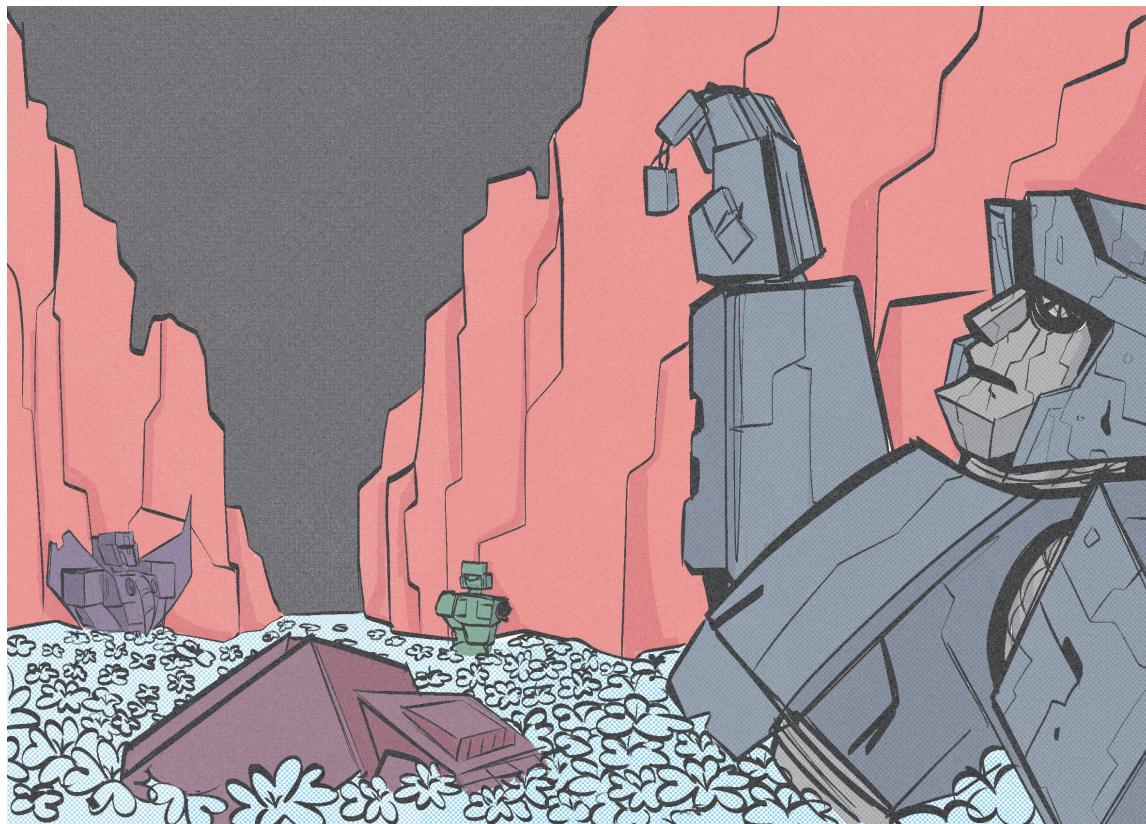
"Drift."

The mech's mouth — *Stray's* mouth — cracks in a shy smile  
Gasket has seen thousands of times before, worn with an edge of unfamiliarity and slightly off around the edges. Something in Gasket turns uncomfortably.

There is a lesson the Dead End teaches a mech very early on; take what you can get, and use it while you can. There is no waste,

because there is not *enough*. Staring at a newspark smiling from his dead friend's body, Gasket realizes that Tinopsie Row was no exception.

"Drift," Gasket repeats, with a nod. "It's nice to meet you."







# The Gladiator War



**Author:** DJ

**Illustrator:** Aerisnoir

*M*

egatron was forged to stand lower than nothing.

To be no one of note. To be without destiny, to end his cycles unheard.

In retrospect, it is clear no one told Megatron this.

From his debut in the gladiatorial pits of Kaon, those who saw this mech were unable to turn their optics away. He engaged the crowd, he earned their respect, he swayed their sympathy, and received their fascination. They became his crowd.

In those days no one knew what he fought for. Megatron himself had not a clue.

With the passage of time, it became clear there was a singular matter, above all else, that Megatron valued: freedom. Calculated, certain, and cunning, Megatron fought for his freedom from the arena. He sought to become part of the very short list of mechs who so impressed the crowd that he was given rudiarius.

Freedom from servitude.

No one knew his motivation. It would not gain him citizenship. It would not reverse the stellar cycles spent under heel of his master, or provide reparations.

History only tells the cause he took up, covered in the energon and the faded sparks of those who stood in his way. For when the crowd Megatron endeared himself to failed him, he took action of his own. Several of the ludus gladiators took up his cause, and any declining were left behind for the Republic to question, and ultimately off-line.

Joining Megatron was the only option for a survival oriented mech.

It started on an eve of post-arena celebrations, with a singular massacre. An ill-placed blade, an improvised weapon, the will to claim freedom for their own. A whole dwelling darkened for lack of spark within it. Warrior and domestic alike, the slaves took their freedom and fled.

Some fled into the cover of darkness without aim, to be caught, examples made to remaining slaves.

Those who followed Megatron, who trusted his plan and his will to survive, made it to the Cybertronian wilderness. Their tracks were covered, and their direction skewed to those who hunted them. They fueled off stores taken when the ludus was plundered. They did not stop until they reached the slopes of Darkmount, a feature of Cybertron so tall, so recklessly intimidating, that no town or dwelling had been built nearby.

"We will rest here. Count our numbers, inventory our stores, and form a stratagem. Soundwave, select scouts to search the area, and report all findings to me. Leave nothing out, even if it appears trivial."

A mech of no words, Soundwave fell into order immediately.

"Starscream, gather all those who followed with us. Assess their combat capabilities. I do not care if they are the Champion of Kaon or an energon cook, I would know how well they can fight. Those who are incapable for any reason, you will send to Shockwave."



"Right away." Despite his treacherous reputation in the arena, Starscream understood the opportunity at hand. He, too, fell into order.

"Shockwave. You will assess our resources, their value, their worth, and how we might use them. Those Starscream cannot teach combat, you will find support roles for."

"If they have no role they can fulfill, Megatron?" Always calculating, logical, Shockwave's reputation as a tactician remained whole.

"We will not have those here who cannot fulfill a role; but even the medic with one optic and no pedes was of use to us when society cast him into the ludus. You will find roles for them, Shockwave." It was a command. In that moment, elected from the remainder of the finest gladiators of the ludus, Megatron had found his generals.

In the wake of chaos, Megatron founded an order.

In time the plan became clear. Those capable were trained combat. The surface surrounding Darkmount was scouted, scanned, and put to use as defense, natural or constructed. Fuel and other resources were inventoried, and rationed. As rumor spread new mechs, casting off their servile bonds, joined with additional resources plundered on their paths to freedom.

As the stellar cycles passed, a rabble become a force. That force became an army. With one act of rebellion, Megatron set himself on the path to forming a reckoning; one the likes of which the Republic had never seen, and would never forget.

It was not without dissent that the rebels waited at Darkmount. With the Republic fast to receive news, and slow to react, there were times debate festered among the rebels.

Why not leave? Scatter to the winds like so much detritus and become invisible in the fabric of society? There were so many of them, the Republic could never find them all; why not take what they had earned, gamble, and make their separate ways across Cybertron?

Megatron never forced any one mech to stay. Whenever debate bubbled, it was an easy reminder that their freedom was theirs, and theirs alone. However, the resources and stores gathered, were for the rebelling armies. Megatron knew the Republic would not negotiate with a rebellion; those that left were doomed.

Staying represented a chance, even slim, of true freedom.

Megatron foresaw what many of them did not: that once the Republic chose to act, it would be swift, without mercy, and with every intention of making a permanent example of those who would dare to rise against the powers in place.

It was an unassuming eve when Soundwave's scouts came with word of a single century of soldiering mechs approaching Darkmount. The smallest contingent available, sent under the banner of a yet unknown commander, Brawn, to quell the servile rebellion.

Under cover of darkness, before the first rays of dawn cracked the horizon, the rebelling masses were wakened and sent to battle stations. No magnificent oration, no reminder of their cause, or what chanced to be lost. It was unnecessary. Nothing was worse than losing the meager percentile of freedom they had taken from their masters.

By the time the century stilled on the closest foothill of Darkmount, the rebel army was prepared. Established in trenches refined or built into the surface, invisible to the optic on approach, the rebels lay in wait. Crude weaponry built from the spoils of their advancement aimed, ready for the first volley.

Megatron did not wait for the Republic's commander to begin; a single command called the servile rebellion to attack, a single command which carried them to victory. "Now!"

Such battles have been waged in the history of Cybertron. There had been other servile uprisings. Other instances of defensive or entrenched warfare. The greater against the lesser. Facing a force that had nothing to lose and everything to gain? A single century stood no chance.

Brawn survived the battle, burdened to report his ignominious defeat to the Republic.

The rebels picked through what remained for resources, spoils to forward their agenda. They mourned those who fell to the attack. Then, they celebrated. Gladiatorial songs and working hymns filled the atmosphere around Darkmount, until some began modifying the stanzas, turning from servility to freedom.

"We cannot remain," Megatron stated to his generals, outside the celebration. "Darkmount carried us through our first victory, but it lacks resources. The Republic will not be foolish enough to send so small a force the second time...or one so easily plundered."

"I concur," Shockwave held the inventory, and knew Megatron's concerns to be valid.

Soundwave said nothing at all.

"There must be some way, Megatron," Starscream reasoned. "A supply train, perhaps, or we could mine for energon beneath Darkmount. I was forged a seeker, you know. It is here."

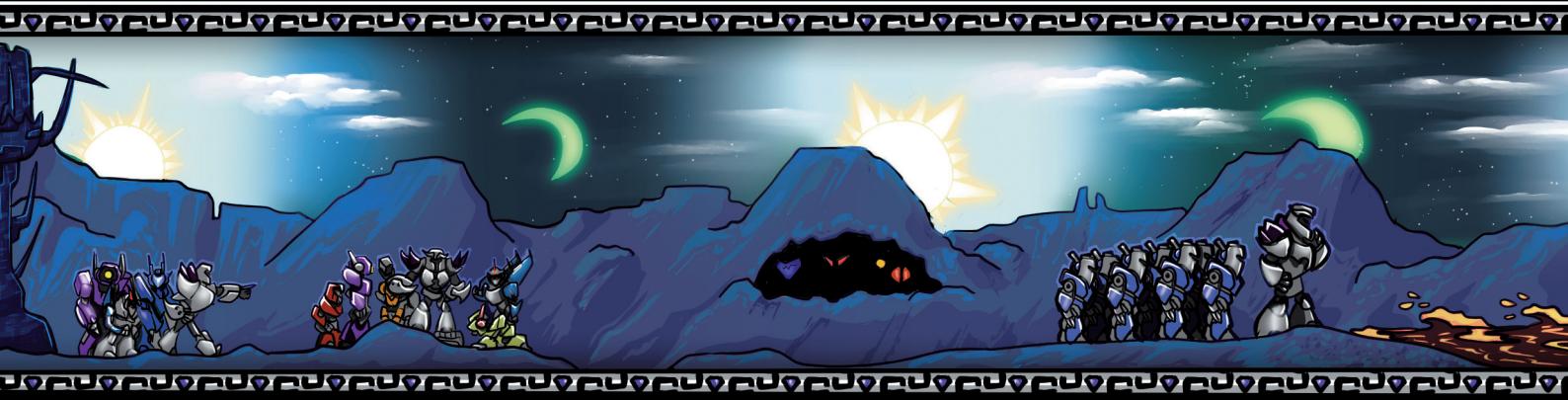
"It may be, Starscream, but we do not have the technology or the resources to mine for it in a capacity that will keep our forces from falling into disarray. Certainly, not before the Republic sends the next commander with lofty ambitions and a larger force to stop us."

"Another time perhaps," Starscream stood against leaving, but the possibility of off-lining was less palatable still. "Where will we go, Lord Megatron?"

It was not a title he denied. "When dawn breaks, we will all begin, every effort to pack as much as we can for the journey. At the next sunset, we will push west under the cover of darkness. It will be burdensome initially, but as we consume energon, we will move faster."

"It will take Brawn time to return to the Republic, then additional time for them to elect another commander. They will need to select troops, arm them." Shockwave paused and calculated. "I concur, Lord Megatron. If we begin moving tomorrow night, we will have time to find another defensible position. A new course of action."

The title stuck. With it, and the new dawn, Megatron's plan was put into action.



Even in the final day of Darkmount's occupation, rebels who had freed themselves were arriving. Concern and caution both had some laying signal down, that they had gone and were not to return. Though where they went, none dared to say, even in servile cant.

Only a prayer was left for those intending to join them; a hope they would find the group force somehow.

Starting out in the evening, the rebel army crossed the landscape from feature to feature as silently and swiftly as they could. During the day they disguising themselves to recharge.

Initially when they came across settlements, they made it a point to steal from them in the dead of night, when few were awake to raise the alarm. The armies became bolder, freeing new slaves as they traveled further, felling entire cities to take resources necessary to the advancement of their cause. Walled cities were prized, allowing the rebels solar cycles to reorganize and inventory before moving on again.

The unruly mix of confidence and hesitation, the rebels' erratic movement across Cybertron's surface, cost them.

The Republic's next choice of commander had clout, and experience in the matter of war; it was no surprise that Ultra Magnus and his legion were able to track the rebels in their path. Too brazen in the eyes of the Republic, the destruction of their cities and harm to their citizens pushed the legion on swiftly to meet the rebels.

Scouts continued to precede and trail the bulk of the rebel forces. Knowing they were pursued, Megatron made the choice to push the armies on a singular path. Day, night, to the edge of the sea Megatron had seen on a map once in his ages as a gladiator; one where pirates crossed and took passengers for a price.

There lay no folly in the idea. Only in the direction the scouts reported.

It was not a sea of liquid, but the Sea of Rust where the rebel legions found themselves pressed to disadvantage, the encroaching legion of Ultra Magnus steady on approach.

"I understand you are with us, Lord Megatron, but I would make it clear we are in dire need of a plan," Starscream, despite having the advantage of flight along with few others in the rebel army, was right to be nervous. Ultra Magnus' career presented distinction and glory, laurels of battles that put the Republic in power and kept it there. "This is no longer a century, it is a legion."

"I am aware, General Starscream. Their strength in numbers threatens our freedom, our purpose. Their grouping and ability to flank would see us decimated. Instead, we must make it their weakness."

Never had the Republic's numbers, their preparedness, their ability to route, never had this been seen as a source of weakness: this is the military genius of Megatron. Where before conquered groups only saw their doom, Megatron sought to find the cracks in the system. Megatron would delay their doom, inevitable though it appeared.

"Shockwave. Soundwave. Take your mechs, and when the legion is close enough that you can see the details of their shield designs, break and run to either side. The faster you can the better."

"My Lord," Shockwave made way for protest. Megatron stopped him with a gesture.



"Starscream. Take as many fliers as can still fly, and leave now. Make show of it, as you would have in the arena. Make it clear you are not staying for this battle in fear of the legion; in fear of Ultra Magnus, in fear of your own spark going off-line. I do not care what direction you take in going, but after you spot the first surface feature or settlement, turn around."

"Much as I value my paneling, Lord Megatron, we would be lost without you. I believe I see your design: make Ultra Magnus believe we have fled, then return, and attack him from the rear and sides."

"And our signal to return?" Shockwave missed nothing.

"The sounds of air support," Megatron mused. "Go now, quickly. Time runs short. Prepare your mechs."

It cannot be said if Megatron understood the scale of what was about to happen; he did not have the advantage of hindsight then. Against a legion the whole of the rebel forces were, generously, half.

Perhaps a third, somewhat diminished. When Starscream made a spectacular show his defection, some of the rebel army believed it. Some of them ran regardless of orders. Some of them did not return to this battlefield, and it can only be assumed what happened to them after.

Megatron's primary force suffered heavy casualties in the wake of the separation, even if this was his stratagem. Upon the fliers' return to the legion's rear, a wide swath cut through, that the legion moved to engulf and crush. With the return of Shockwave the legion was again harried, now from the side, and once more when Soundwave returned with those who remained loyal.

These stood the scraps of victorious linings in the Battle of the Rust Sea.

A third of the rebel armies became a fourth, down to an eighth, before the Republic's legion cut its losses and called to retreat.

The impression of victory was short-lived.

"Lord Megatron, they took Soundwave," Starscream reported on landing. "They are retreating with him, and slaying those who stand in their path of retreat."

Megatron's faceplates shifted between realization, anger, and distress. "We cannot afford to follow," he stated, the strain in his vocalizer betraying him. "We will stand no chance if we do that. First, we must go. Then, when we have more rebels, a better trained army, we will find him. We will rescue him."

"Unlikely. The Republic will torture Soundwave to divulge intelligence. When he fails to produce intelligence, the most likely result is off-lining." Where Megatron was the tactician, Shockwave stood the logician. "He was the best for capture: his silence precedes his grave."

"Only you could see the bright side of losing our most respected colleague," Starscream continued, "it isn't a victory."

"Until I find proof of his rusting frame, I will find him again," Megatron swore the oath. "Until I have a more complete army, we will retreat," Megatron promised in immediate action. "We break south. I misunderstood the features of Cybertron beyond the arena once, I will not do so again."

Starscream's truth provided less than cold comfort: it was not victory at the edge of the Sea of Rust. It was survival. It was a relief felt by those left standing, more than any sense of having won the day.

Down a favored general, the frames of those passed on tossed into the gusting winds of the Sea of Rust, nothing was felt more keenly than contrition. What else could it be, but the gods' retaliation for decacycles of turning on the Republic? How dare these rebels turn on their masters, how dare they want more to their lives than servitude to others!

If they were back in their prior positions, if the rebellion had never opened to them, they would still suffer; but the suffering would be known, the suffering would be expected. The loss of those who had grown close was not a burden they would carry.

Sorrow and doubt demoralized the rebel army beyond their physical loss.

Some chose to leave, against advice, to find new masters. More perished on the journey, though from regret, despair, injuries, or dwindling resources is difficult to determine.

The crossing around the Sea of Rust was not glorified in song. No clever parodies or poems came of it, only silence. Even the will merely to survive had been sapped from the rebels.

If their leader had been any but Megatron, supported still by his generals Starscream and Shockwave, it is unlikely those who remained would have continued on.

Unlike a leader of legions, a leader of the Republic, Megatron visited his rebels. Every one. He did not know all their names; all their statuses, duties, their reputations prior to joining his struggle. Instead he learned who they were now, with him, assisted them in casting off their prior designation in favor of new identities. He attended training to ensure they could all defend themselves.

When the scouts held a vigil for Soundwave, Megatron was there.

When supply needed to decide what to cast off and what to keep in the face of a diminished capacity, Megatron did not shy from duty.

Megatron brought this group together, and Megatron remained its central point. Those who remained, even in the face of ignominious defeat, had earned Megatron's utter and complete loyalty. In turn, he had earned theirs.

The rebels claimed Megatron as a true leader.

In reality, without them, Megatron was also lost.



"It is with deep regret that we move on without Soundwave at this juncture."

Despite the tepid reception from the rebel armies, Megatron pushed on. West, past additional Republic settlements without incident or plunder. An army running on low: low reserves, low supplies, low morale. Facing the brink, Megatron's plan was made clear to the remaining rebels.

"We will go to the sea, and contract pirates with the remains of our richest plunder, to take us as far from Iacon as the Mithril Sea will go. Make no mistake, we will continue to be hounded. However, we will be at the furthest reaches. They will have to stretch their resources far and thin to reach us, and it will force them to make a decision."

"To waste their deep, but limited, reserves tracking and hunting us, or to save them and - not." Shockwave made it clear. The Republic would never forget their uprising, and this was a gamble. He did not protest.

"It is this or be forever a slave. Neither settles well with me, but one is measurably worse," Starscream agreed.

"When we arrive at our destination, we scatter." Silence fell over the gathered generals and trusted seconds.

"Lord Megatron," Starscream silenced briefly, before airing his concerns. "Why now? Why did we not scatter before? Why are we separating on arrival to the unknown, and not when the troops raised query at Darkmount?"

Shockwave remained silent in unerring support of their commander.

"Unfortunately, Starscream, we are no longer in the auspicious position we were. Since Soundwave's capture, I've experienced clarity. We must look to our own survival before we can hope to seize the power of the Republic. Without survival we are destined to fail, even when so many more can yet be rescued. We need time, and a plan that isn't as clear to the Republic as the path we currently tread."

Shockwave bowed. "My lord."

Not to be outdone, Starscream bowed in kind. "This is not the end, then."

"So long as I function, Starscream, this will never end. For the moment, we must move on, and forward, separated in the masses of Cybertron as silent agents of dissent," Megatron commanded of his generals, and the rebels in whole. "Then, when the time is right, we will rise again."



Despite his words and conviction, difficulty paved the path to the Mithril Sea. Energon was lost. Plunder was lost. Mechs were lost. Of those who did not die, many succumbed to woe and illness of the mind. What were once thousands had dwindled to hundreds, fewer combat capable when bearing in mind the condition of many mecha in Megatron's command.

Many days, hidden in the landscape or ruins of former settlements, the rebels whispered among themselves. Once again they murmured of freedom, where only a decacycle before they roared it at the top of their vocalizers. Although he had all but relinquished control of the rebels, they sought freedom from Megatron now.

Their trust suffered the same fate as their morale.

When dawn broke, for the first time reflected in shimmering flashes off the waves of the Mithril Sea, relief passed from mech to mech: they could see a path to the end of their arduous journey, if they could only strike a deal for passage. The idea of freedom weighed heavy.

Megatron wasted no time in approaching those moored at the closet dock. Stanixian pirates, waiting for plunder or passage. They would have both from Megatron, in exchange for the safe transport of his rebel troops.

The Stanixians bartered, and reasoned. With these numbers, they needed time to call more ships, agreeing to sail on the eve after next. Megatron and his rebel armies were forced to hide once more, to pass the daylight hours talking of what they would do on the other side of the Mithril Sea.

The evening arrived, without the Stanixians in port. Only Megatron awoke in time to see them sailing away with ill-gotten plunder, disappearing on the horizon without a farewell. There was not time to mourn.

"My Lord Megatron," Shockwave reported. "The Republic is coming."

Banners of blue and gold dotted the skyline, on fast approach from the north. Iacon, the seat of the Republic, had sent a commander so decorated, so powerful, that not even the youngest in the rabble of Megatron's armies failed to know the name: Sentinel Zeta Prime.

Only Megatron knows if it was the reputation, the name, or the display of the mech in question that spurred him into action. With a rallying cry that would wake the dead, Megatron called the remainder of his troops to him.



"We are at an edge of the world few of us have never known. We may never see beyond it, but I took on the matter of your freedom when I took on the mantle of commander. I will not recant that now! If it is in our fate to deactivate, if it is in our fate to return to the Well of the All-Sparks, or lay our sparks in the hands of Primus, or whatever you believe! Then let us do it now, together, with the will of one. Let us leave no mech behind! Let the Republic not mistake any form of defeat for submission!"

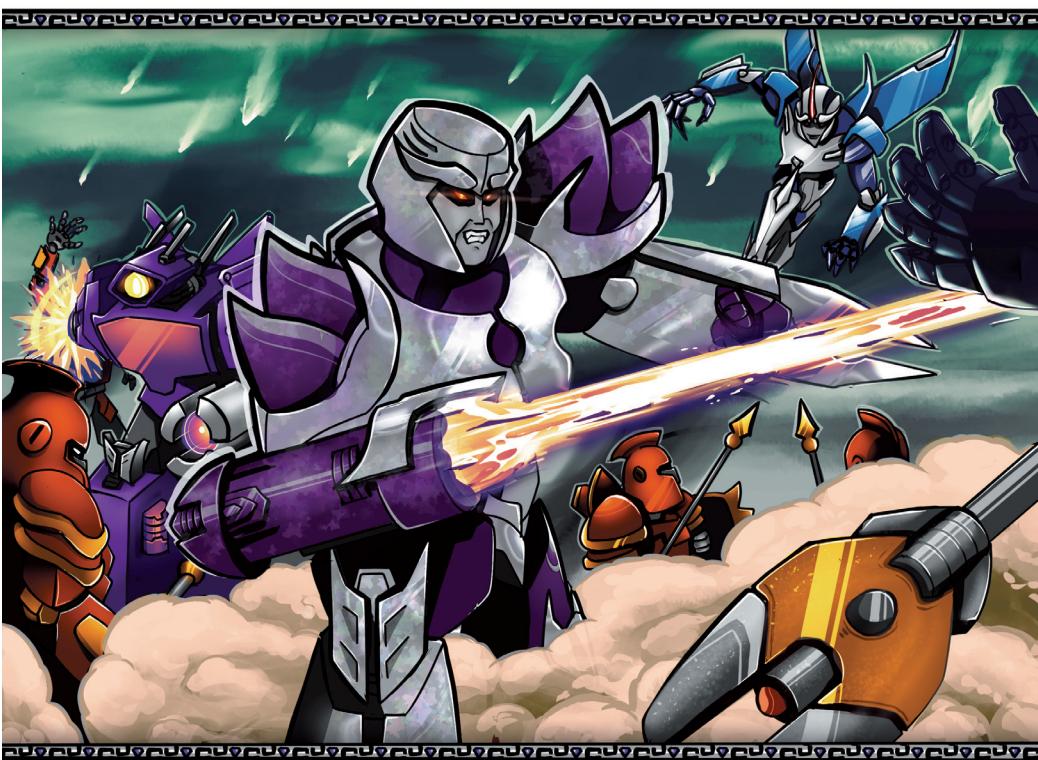
The cry of those remaining mechs, worn and stripped of hope only cycles before, shook the surface with their agreement.

"If we are to end, then I would have it be such an end as to scar the face of the Republic for the remainder of its tenure!" Another roar answered him, along with the clang of readying weapons.

"Mechs! To the ready!"

Where the battle against Ultra Magnus had been decimating, this battle was to face extinction. Starscream found escape after the first clash, and Shockwave disappeared into the fray, surrounded by a century of Republic soldiers as he continued to fight. Megatron reaped a path towards the largest of all the banners, undoubtedly where Sentinel Zeta Prime waited.

Even when he cleared a contingent, the tides of the army swept in behind Megatron once more, and Sentinel Zeta Prime did not move to engage the rebel commander.



There had never been carnage recorded of this nature in the span of the Republic. This was no longer a battle between two armies in a war. This was no longer a war of risen slaves calling forth the courage to deny their masters. The armies of the Republic, widely regarded with service offering glory and citizenship, faced only the howling desperation of mechs who would no longer beg and scrape for freedom.

They would have freedom, or they would have deactivation, and in being deactivated they would take several Republic mechs down with them.

Even with the numbers against them, the rebel armies fought to the last.

Silence came with the dawn.

The field never cleared. There was only piles of frames where there had once been standing soldiers on both sides. The frames of Megatron, Shockwave, and a handful of others were never recovered.

The frames of the Republic soldiers were handled in accordance to the Republic's policies, based on the rank of the soldier in question. The rebel soldiers who had passed well in advance of the battle's end were arranged in gruesome cues to those who might try to start another uprising. They lined the road from the Mithril Sea, all the way back to Iacon.

They were the lucky ones.

The frames of the rebel soldiers who had spark left were put in stasis lock before being returned to the Republic to be punished, debased, and publicly executed for the crimes of wanting beyond the measure of what privileges they were afforded upon forging.

The popular, public, and vocal opinion of the Republic remained firm. Any who should try to usurp its rule would find themselves treated the same.



In private quarters, whispered far from powerful audials, fear seeped into the homes and processors of those who called themselves citizens of the Republic. There were those who punished their slaves more freely, for any infraction real or imagined, remembering those lost to Megatron and his rebel legions. There were those who treated their slaves with a softer hand, taking into consideration what they did for their masters every solar cycle, without complaint.

Although the Republic denies it, Megatron's revolution had a profound effect on all those residing within it.

It is this historian's opinion that if the rebel soldiers had never been branded slave, whether gladiator or valet, the Republic would have been spared this uprising and the embarrassment that followed.



"You mean to tell us that your suggestion for ending the slave uprisings, is to *free the slaves?*" The senator sounded at once offended and startled. A tide of murmurs rose and gathered to his disbelief.

"I do not recall making such a claim. I am merely a librarian, sir, and I can only tell you the story as I witnessed it; as a citizen and historian who was caught in the uprising and survived to share this information."

Another tide of murmurs and disbelief; it was not the first time my citizenship had been questioned. Not the first time I was asked, implicitly or explicitly, why I stood by and did nothing to stop the advancing slave hoards. Not the first time I had to remind someone that I am not a warrior.

It is the first time I have had more to say on the matter. "If I had been struck down like all the others in Megatron's ludus, you would not have these insights today."

The meaning is clear, and yet they do not like it.

It usurps millennia of their lifestyles, of everything they had been taught was true. I hadn't liked it either, but in enduring what I saw, in watching my kin-mech and fellow citizens fall under the gladiatorial training we so eagerly forced upon those we consider lesser, I learned more than even Sentinel Zeta Prime could parse from a decacycle of scouting.

They do not have to like it; they need me.

Finally the murmurs die down, and a decision has been reached.

Faceplates shifted into the ugliest scowl, the senator leading the proceedings reaches for his gavel and brings it down with a hesitant clap. "It is so decided. This citizen who stands before us today, Orion Pax, will retain his citizenship within the Republic. This hearing acknowledges he is not a military mech, or a fighter capable of might. We would, however, warn you to steer clear of such seditious mech in the future. It would look unkindly on you to be seen within arm's reach of such behavior ever again."

Oh? A warning? "I would remind this hearing that I am a victim. Although you see it wrong that I did not choose to throw away my own spark by crossing stylus with sword, I was, and I remain, a citizen of the Republic whose combat training has been to locate and subdue code that would otherwise corrupt - in whole, or in part - our archives."

Their silence justifies me although they remain petulant; in that brief moment, I imagine this is what it was like, when Megatron tasted victory.

"We hear you, Citizen Orion Pax. Your defense is well noted. Please, return to your archives, and continue your work." In theory it is over. In reality Megatron's frame was never recovered. The council knows this, yet chooses to secret the knowledge.

I wonder what his next stratagem will be.





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# The Wild Hunt



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Hot Rod couldn't remember when he'd first heard about the Wild Hunt. But he did remember the night he became borderline obsessed with it, and when the idea first formed in his head to try and see the Hunt for himself.

"The Hunt only happens on True Dark, on nights just like tonight," his uncle Kup told him. That night, the window shutters were tightly barred, and only a dim light shone in Hot Rod's room. Kup was settled into his chair beside Hot Rod's bed, with his hands planted on his knees as he leaned towards the young bot. "It's a night where the sun has set, but so have all three of the moons, and there's only the light of the stars and your headlights to see by. It only happens every few years, you know."

Hot Rod didn't know, but he nodded. "When was the last time it happened?" he asked.

Kup leaned back and considered the question. "Oh, probably a good six years now, I think. You were just a little two-cylinder then." He gave Hot Rod a playful punch on the shoulder, grinning at the engine rev it startled out of the younger bot. His face grew serious again. "But they got someone then. Fool walked right out into the night and was never seen again."

Hot Rod stared at his uncle with wide optics. "What happened?" he said, trying not to let his voice quaver.

"No one knows. No one was fool enough to go after him. But it's always the same. Someone wanders outside on a night like this, and then..." Kup crossed his arms over his chest. "Then they take you, whether you want to go with them or not. They say the Hunt takes you down to the Pit, and you're never seen nor heard from again."

Just then a gust of wind shook the window shutters, rattling them against their frames. Hot Rod jumped.

"Can't anything stop them?" Hot Rod asked. It felt as though his optics might fall out of his head, they were so wide.

From the other room came Ultra Magnus's deep voice. "Kup! You aren't scaring him before bed, are you?"

"Of course not!" Kup called back. He grinned at Hot Rod and asked, "You're not scared, are you?"

"No!" Hot Rod said, although then he noticed that his spoiler was quivering, and his spark was fluttering wildly in his chest. He sat up and stilled his spoiler with an effort. "So? Is there any way to stop them?"



"Well, they say that silver can stop any servant of Unicron," Kup said thoughtfully. "It's a metal sacred to Primus, and Unicron's servants can neither touch it nor break any weapon forged of it." He chewed on his cy-gar for a moment before adding, "But that **might** just be superstition."

Hot Rod nibbled on his lower lip for a moment, thinking. "So if no one ever gets away from the Hunt, how do you know what happens?" he asked. "Maybe... Maybe the Hunt isn't real. Maybe all those missing bots just drove off!"

The shutters rattled again, louder than before. But Hot Rod didn't jump this time, and instead waited for Kup to answer.

Kup looked at Hot Rod with narrowed optics. "Oh, the Hunt is real, my boy. Trust me. I've seen 'em with my own two optics, back when I was a lot younger and a lot more stupid." Seemingly without his notice, the fingers of Kup's right hand drifted to the odd scars on his left arm, stripes of discoloured plating just above his elbow that he'd had for as long as Hot Rod had known him.

Hot Rod leaned forward eagerly. "How did you do it without being taken?" he asked. "What did you see?" He pointed at the elongated scars on Kup's arm. "Did the Hunt give you those scars?"

Kup glanced down at his arm, and snatched his fingers away from the scars. With a grumble, Kup stood up. "Maybe I'll tell you when you're older. Old enough not to do the same stupid things I did when I was your age." He switched off the small lamp beside the bed and walked to the door. "Get some recharge, lad."

But Hot Rod stayed awake, thinking about what Kup had told him. He wondered if there was a way he could see the Wild Hunt for himself when it next returned. He knew he could come up with a plan. With that thought rattling around in his processor, he drifted into recharge as he listened to the wind howling around the shutters and the thunder rolling through the clouds. It almost sounded like hoofbeats.



"I saw the Hunt take a bot once." Jazz leaned back, hands casually pillowing his helm against the side of the crystal they sat beneath.

"You did not!" Bluestreak gasped. He stared at Jazz, all wide optics and gaping mouth.

"Did," Jazz said. "It was, oh, probably a good twenty years ago now. Rico and I were about your age, Blue." He pointed a finger at Bluestreak, and grinned. "We peeked out through our window shutters, determined to see the Hunt. We saw a bot driving out of the village, and we saw their taillights fade into the night, into the fog that had come up." He waved his hand slowly in the air, his fingers fanned wide. "We saw their lights rise into the sky, and then..." Jazz snapped his fingers. "Just like that, they were gone."

"Gone?!" Bluestreak squeaked. He leaned forward on his knees, his door wings quaking behind him. "Who was it?"

"No one you'd know, Blue. This was years and years before you were even forged. But it was a bot a few years older than me and Rico, named Barricade. He was a real troublemaker... Never listened to a word anyone said." Jazz shrugged. "Anyway, come morning, he was gone without a trace."

Bluestreak looked back and forth between Jazz and Hot Rod. "That's so scary! Isn't it scary, Hot Rod? The next True Dark night is coming just in a few months, and that means the Hunt is coming too. I know they say the Hunt can't find you if you're inside, but what if something happens and I have to go outside? Or what if they find me inside?" Bluestreak clutched his arms around him. "What if they take **me** away?"



As the bell rang to call students back to class, Jazz grinned at Bluestreak again. "Don't you worry, little bot. So long as your shutters are closed and you mind your elders, you'll be safe." He patted Bluestreak on the shoulder. "Off to class with you."

Hot Rod watched Bluestreak transform and tear across the yard to the school building before turning his attention back to Jazz. "Did you **really** see the Hunt?" he asked the older bot. A tiny thread of jealousy had wormed its way into his spark as Jazz related his story, but Hot Rod shoved it aside. If Jazz knew anything on how to see the Hunt for himself, Hot Rod was determined to get it out of him.

But Jazz shook his head with a smile. "Nah. I was just fibbin' to try and make sure Blue stays inside. Don't tell him that, though, a'ight? The kid's got skills. He's being completely wasted as a field hand. When he gets old enough, and with some training, he's gonna make a good guard for the village. I wanna keep him safe until then." He sat up and grabbed his synth-bass, strumming a few chords before continuing. "Anyway, me and Rico, we didn't **see** the Hunt, not directly. But we **heard** them, which was plenty for me." He hesitated. "Sounded like the gates of the Pit had opened, and all of the beasts within were running wild." Jazz played a discordant note. "It's not something I want to hear again, that's for sure."

Hot Rod sat back on his heels, then pulled out the new strap he'd saved up months to buy. "Here, I brought this in trade, just like we agreed."

"Thanks!" Jazz unhooked the strap from his synth-bass and handed it over to Hot Rod before attaching the new one. "Hot Rod," he asked, giving the younger bot a sidelong glance. "You ain't gonna do anything stupid, are you?"

"No," Hot Rod said, but he ran the synth-bass strap through his fingers, lingering on the long silver strands woven into it. "Of course not."



A month later, just a few days before the night of True Dark, Hot Rod hovered in the entrance of Ironhide's metalwork shop. "I'm just checking to see if my order is ready," he said when the metalsmith looked up from his work.

"Yeah, it's ready. I set aside some other contracts to get it done. I was getting' tired of you poppin' in here constantly to check." Ironhide reached under his bench and pulled out a bag, handing it over to the young bot. "Give it a look and make sure it's what you were lookin' for."

Hot Rod opened the bag and reverently pulled out a length of silver rope. It was intricately braided, woven through with quartz and obsidian. Hot Rod ran his fingers along the rope, then examined the pointed barb on the end, made from the purest steel Ironhide could make. All of the silver he collected - strands from Jazz's synth-bass strap, shavings he traded Springer his lunch for, shiny baubles that Grimlock had collected - had been spun into thread and woven into the rope. "It's perfect," Hot Rod said, pulling on the rope to test its strength.

He looked up to see Ironhide staring at him with a strange expression. "You're gonna do somethin' stupid with that rope, aren't ya?" Ironhide asked.

"Why does everyone always ask me that?" Hot Rod asked. When Ironhide didn't reply, Hot Rod just shrugged. "I'll be careful."

Ironhide grunted, then turned back to his work. "Just don't let Kup know I made that for ya," he said. "I'll never hear the end of it."



Just after sunset on the night of True Dark, Kup paused in the door of Hot Rod's room. He pulled his cy-gar from his mouth to point it at the young bot. "You stay inside tonight, lad. And keep your window shutters closed."

"I will, uncle," Hot Rod said, smiling his most innocent smile. He gestured at the shutters. "See? Already closed."

Kup stared at Hot Rod for a moment more before heaving a sigh. "Aye. They are." He shook his head, then gave Hot Rod a wan smile. "Whatever you do, lad, stay safe." Then he turned, pulling the door shut behind him, and left Hot Rod alone.



Hot Rod dimmed the lamp and lay down on his bed, pulling the covers up over his head. He flicked on his headlights and tabbed on the datapad he'd hidden under the covers. With a keen optic that his teachers probably wished he'd shown to his schoolwork, Hot Rod reviewed the plan he'd carefully written and revised over the past several years.

He'd scoured the Archives for stories of the Hunt, and had pestered Orion Pax to help him find records of odd happenings during past True Darks. (For a history report, Hot Rod had said.) He'd sketched out a map of every place traces of the Hunt had been found in the village, trying to locate the best place to witness the Hunt's passing. He'd endured longwinded lectures from Sunstorm about the prophecies of Unicron, simply to confirm what metal and crystals would best protect him against the Unmaker's heralds. He'd covered every base he could think of, and devised what most surely was a winning plan.

Two hours passed, and Hot Rod kept himself alert by listening to the familiar evening sounds of the household. He heard Kup's shuffled gait as he walked past Hot Rod's room once more on the way to his own. Ultra Magnus's heavy tread on the stair came much later than Hot Rod expected, but the large bot went directly to his room and closed the door behind him. Then the house fell silent.

Once he was sure the rest of the house was in recharge, Hot Rod quietly crept from his berth and grabbed the silver cord and iron barb from underneath. Then down the hall, out the door (rerouting the security system so that it would forget it saw him leave), and out onto the road.

The drive to the crossroads just outside of town only took a few minutes. Finding a suitable place to bury the iron barb into the surface of the road took longer; Hot Rod had to try a few different places to find a spot where the barb could be placed and hold to his satisfaction. He tied the silver cord to the barb (using the special knot Mirage had shown him, one that would get tighter and tighter the more it was pulled), and he tied the other end of the cord around his waist.

Just as Hot Rod finished his work, the third moon slipped below the horizon, and total darkness fell across the land.

The dark was all-encompassing, darker than any night Hot Rod had ever experienced. He turned on his headlights, but immediately turned them off again as his light was reflected back at him by a swirling mist that had risen out of nowhere. He could see nothing, and could hear nothing but the soft whistle of wind through the crystals growing at the side of the road.

Hot Rod knelt at the crossroads and waited.

It might have been hours, or only a few minutes, but Hot Rod lifted his head when he heard thunder in the distance. Strange; he knew the skies had been clear just before sunset, and it was the wrong season for storms. But the thunder grew louder, and closer, until the thunder resolved itself into the roaring sound of hundreds of bots driving straight at him, or the stampede of a herd of zap ponies. Hot Rod peered into the darkness and caught glimpses of movement here and there: a glint of light on armor, or a dim light silhouetting a shape in the darkness.

The rumble of pedes landing on the dry ground fell over him, then around him like a river of sound, vibrating the rock under Hot Rod's knees. He squinted into the darkness, trying to make out something – anything! – in the shifting mists as the unseen creatures flowed around him.

Then, as if stopped by an unheard command, the noise stopped.

All was silent.

Hot Rod blinked and strained his optics, trying to make out anything in the dark. Had he imagined the sound? Had he fallen into recharge and dreamt the roar of engines and the shaking of the ground?

"Is someone there?" Hot Rod called, and hated that his voice quavered.

With the roar of an overtaxed engine, the mist parted. Hot Rod only had time to register disconnected flashes of images - the pawing of hooves in the air over his head, the gleam of red optics and sharp fangs in a muzzled face, the whip of wires flowing from a curving neck – before those large metal hooves slammed to the ground on either side of Hot Rod's knees, their owner towering over him.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" said a voice from overhead, a voice smooth as oil and hard as diamond.



In his fright, Hot Rod had turned on his headlights again, but all they illuminated at this range were the blackened hooves just centimeters from his knees. Hot Rod craned his neck up, up past the strong legs that pawed at the ground, past the thick neck that arched in protest as it was roughly reined back, and past the glowing optics. The beast stepped backwards, reluctantly so, and Hot Rod could finally see the bot mounted on its back. The rider turned his mount, showing off the

large cannon attached to his arm.

The rider smiled down from his seat. "What are you doing out here on such a dark night, young one?"

Hot Rod lurched to his feet, both because it would make him feel taller in comparison to the bot looming over him, and because it gave him a chance to collect his thoughts before speaking. Once he was standing, he met the rider's gaze. "I wanted to see the Wild Hunt."

"Then you are in luck, for you have found us!" The rider threw his arm out, and laughter rose from the mists that surrounded them. Hot Rod looked around, and saw shapes in the fog: half-seen shadows of bots, figures that twisted and faded and reappeared as the mist swirled around him. The laughter faded, and Hot Rod looked up again when he heard the beast's saddle creak. The bot with the cannon leaned down to look at him closer. A smile curled his lips as he asked, "Tell me, young one. What is your name?"

Hot Rod lifted his chin fractionally, willing himself to look taller. "My name is Hot Rod."

The mounted bot smiled, then slipped off of his beast with a practiced motion. "Greetings, Hot Rod," he said, handing his mount's reins to a tall purple bot who stepped out of the fog. "You may call me Galvatron. I am the Lord of the Hunt." He stepped closer to Hot Rod, until Hot Rod could smell the tang of sulphur and burnt metal that surrounded Galvatron. "Why do you seek us out?"

"I know you take bots from the village, and no one ever sees them again." Hot Rod squared his shoulders as he looked up at Galvatron. "I've heard the stories and... And I wanted to see for myself if they were true."

"Hmm. So, just curiosity, then." Galvatron's words were a statement of fact, not a question. He turned towards his mount, and gently ran his hand down its muzzle. The beast snorted and stamped one of its hooves, but it leaned into his touch. "And what do you think happens to those bots, the ones who vanish into the darkest night? What do you think is the Wild Hunt's purpose?"

Hot Rod worked his intake. "I... I don't know," he admitted.

Galvatron gave his mount one more pat before turning back to Hot Rod. "Well, young one, the Hunt finds warriors to fight for our Master. Everyone has a place, but the best and most worthy warriors are welcomed into our ranks to become riders alongside me." He looked Hot Rod up and down appraisingly. "Worthy warriors such as you, Hot Rod."

"Me?" Hot Rod stammered.

"Yes. You would make a fine addition to our Hunt," Galvatron said. His optics narrowed as if sizing Hot Rod up again. "Imagine riding the winds, riding far faster than you have ever driven before, being part of the most feared army in the world." Galvatron's smile widened as he met Hot Rod's wide optics. "Imagine seeing sights that no mortal Cybertronian has ever witnessed: the pooling of energon in the depths of the planet, the dance of electricity between the motes of dust above us, the whisper of sparks as they cross from the realm of the living into the realm of our Master. And then..." Galvatron swung his arms wide, his cannon tracing an arc just above Hot Rod's head. "And then, upon completion of a successful Hunt... The feasting begins!"



Hot Rod startled at the roar of cheers that erupted from the fog all around him. He looked around again at the half-seen figures. Some of them didn't look like bots. Maybe some of them were astride mounts like Galvatron's? Or maybe they had other shapes...

"I would have you at my side, Hot Rod," Galvatron said, drawing Hot Rod's attention back to him. "You have the skill to be a great warrior." He held out his hand. "You will come with me, and join us!"

Hot Rod looked down at Galvatron's hand, and saw the larger bot's fingers were tipped with long talons, wisps of frost curling from them.

Hot Rod lifted his chin to look Galvatron in the optics again. "No, thank you," he said. "I would prefer to stay here."

The smile fell from Galvatron's face as if it had never been there. "That was not a request, young one," he said. Every trace of geniality was suddenly gone, and now the words grated like ice from his vocalizer. "You will come with us."

Planting his feet as firmly as he could into the dusty rock beneath him, Hot Rod felt behind him and gripped the silver cord in his hand. "No. I will not," Hot Rod said.

As Galvatron loomed over him, Hot Rod had a sudden and fervent wish that he'd listened to Kup, and stayed inside.

Galvatron snarled. In an instant, he seemed to grow larger, and his optics flashed a brilliant scarlet. "Fool! The Herald of Unicron will not be denied. I will not be denied!" With a quick motion, Galvatron grabbed Hot Rod's arm.

At Galvatron's touch, Hot Rod cried out in pain. It felt as though all of his frame's heat was being sucked out of him through his arm, where Galvatron's fingers pressed against him. His attention was refocused as Galvatron tugged on his arm, dragging him away from where he stood.

"No!" Hot Rod yelled, digging his heels into the ground. But Galvatron was larger and stronger, and Hot Rod's heels left furrows in the ground as he was towed towards the larger bot's mount. Hot Rod's spark leapt into his throat as he felt the silver cord snap taut as it reached its limit.

But it held.

"What?" Galvatron growled, yanking on his arm again. "What is this?"

Hot Rod looked back, and saw the silver cord was pulled firm between Hot Rod and the barb where it was stuck into the ground. But it held. He looked up at Galvatron. "It's silver, unbreakable by servants of Unicron, with quartz and obsidian, for protection and truth." Hot Rod ventured a smile. "You cannot take me."

"Ridiculous!" Galvatron's optics smouldered, and he lifted his cannon, aiming it at Hot Rod. "If I cannot have you for myself, then no one will!"

Oh. No. This wasn't part of the plan.

Hot Rod squeezed his optics shut.

But instead of the helm-shattering explosion that Hot Rod was expecting, he heard another voice. "My Lord, please... Time grows short." Hot Rod cracked open an optic. The tall purple flier who'd taken Galvatron's mount from him put a hand on Galvatron's arm, pushing it down and to the side just a fraction. "The sunrise..."



Hot Rod looked to the horizon. Through the fading fog he saw the horizon was lit with a bright glow, a promise that a new day and a brilliant sunrise would begin in just a few minutes.

Galvatron must have seen the same thing, because he roared in frustration. He whirled and grabbed the reins of his mount, swinging himself into the saddle in a smooth, fluid motion. As his mount reared and wheeled around, Galvatron pointed at Hot Rod. "Watch yourself, young one. I will not forget this. You **will** be mine."

Then, with a flurry of shifting shadows and an unholy screech, Galvatron and the host of unseen mechs vanished into thin air.

Hot Rod gasped and fell to his knees as the first rays of the sun crawled over the horizon, lighting the scene around him and burning off the last remnants of the fog. The ground bore no sign of the beasts that had just been around him – no trace of footprint or hoof print, no scrape of claw or talon, no mark of tread or wheel.

A throb of pain on his arm made Hot Rod look down. He held his arm up to catch the light of the sun as it grew brighter around him so that he could see it more clearly.

Burned into his paint was the unmistakable mark of a handprint where taloned fingers had curled around his upper arm, frost still curling from the edges of the print.

Hot Rod made his way home carefully, slipping back into the house the same way he'd left. He silently crept back to his room and into his berth, but recharge did not come.

A few hours later there was a knock on his door, and Kup stuck his head into the room. It might have been Hot Rod's imagination, but Kup looked relieved to see him there. "Ah, lad. Good. You're up. Ready to come down for some fuel?"

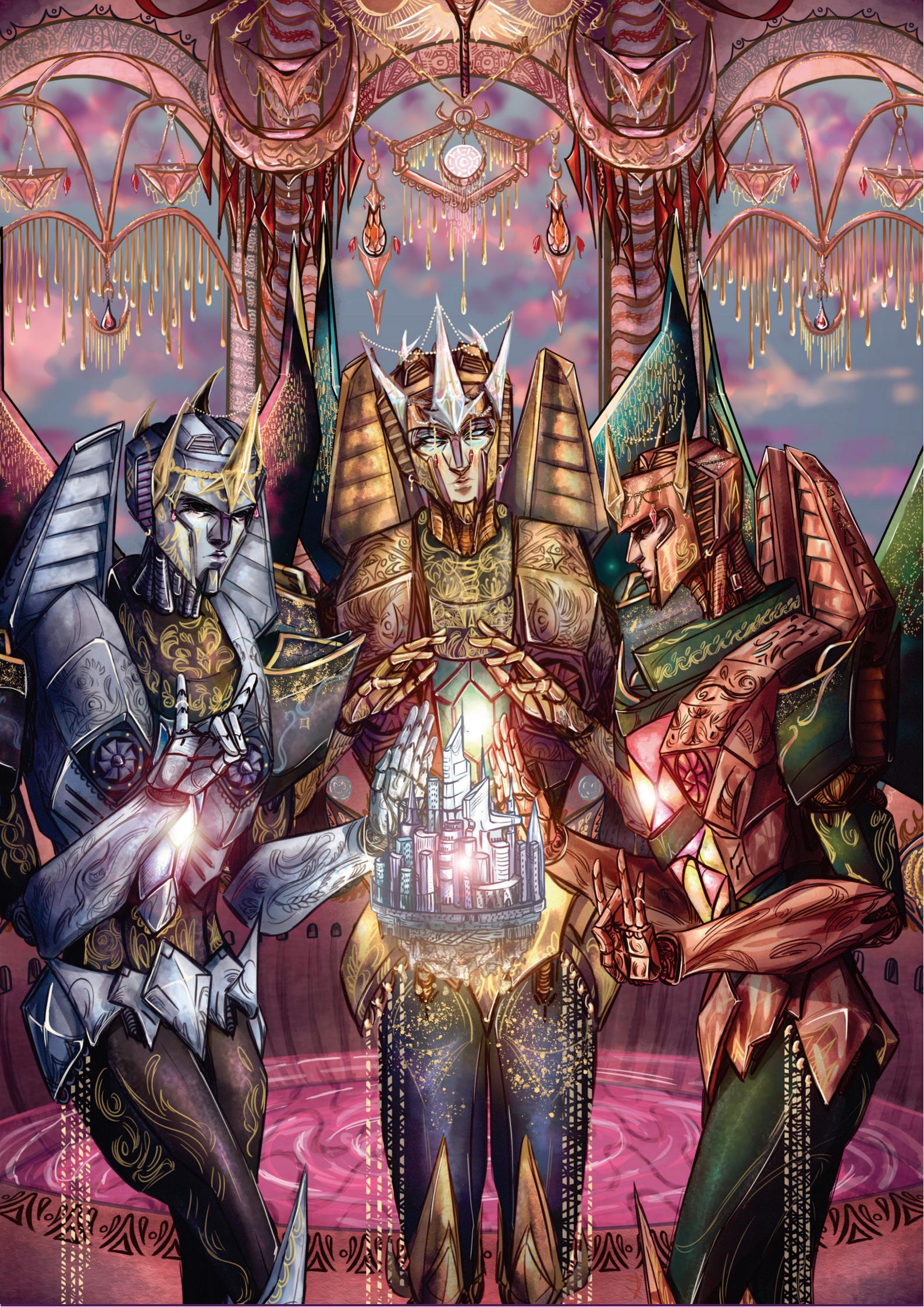
Hot Rod pushed himself up from his berth, hoping he didn't look as exhausted as he felt. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be right down. I'll just get washed up first."

But as he passed Kup in the doorway, the older bot put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. Kup gently lifted Hot Rod's arm, looking at the fresh mark on his paint. "Lad..."

"I can explain, Kup. I -" Hot Rod started to say, stammering as he hunted for words.

Kup held up his hand to silence Hot Rod, then held out his own arm, where matching stripes of discoloured plating marred his paint. He gave Hot Rod a smile, then shook his head. "Once Ultra Magnus is off for the day, maybe you and I can compare notes."





# Unseen Elements



**Author:** Decepticonsensual

**Illustrator:** Remnince



"Rowded tonight! Mind if park myself here?"

The mech in the booth glances up. His smile is a little slow in coming, but warm once it arrives.

"Of course not." The hand clutching the tiny paintbrush waves at the bench opposite, before returning to the plating of the miniature spaceship resting on his other palm. "Be my guest."

Nightbeat drops onto the bench. His new companion darts a curious glance at him, which makes sense - Maccadam's New Oil House is lively this evening, sure, but not so packed that Nightbeat couldn't have found an empty table. He cycles his vocaliser and jumps in before the mech can start to get suspicious. "So. Models, huh?"

The mech's smile turns shy. "It keeps me occupied."

"What's that one meant to be, then?"

"Oh - this is the ship of the Thirteen Primes, when they first set out to explore the universe? It's said that..."

Nightbeat leans in and listens intently, as the mech expounds on the design of an ancient spaceship. Not to the words - he has frankly zero interest in ships that departed from Cybertron and then actually came back again, there's no mystery in that, and even less of one in the precise moulding techniques used to produce tiny versions of those ships - but to everything else about the speaker. The mech is a little slip of a thing, all slender limbs and long fingers and single wheel that almost looks too big for him. With his bright orange paintjob, it shouldn't be possible for him to slip into the background, and yet he does - Nightbeat's optic must have passed over him twice or three times when he was initially scanning the bar. He's unobtrusive. Dull. A bit less so, now, perhaps; talking about his hobby seems to light him up from the inside. He talks with the desperation of the lonely, and Nightbeat gets the impression that this mech hasn't had anyone to listen to him for quite some time.

He's solidly, undeniably ordinary - but not *so* ordinary that it has to be an act. He's just... normal.

And that sets off every alarm in Nightbeat's head.



*"The assignment is a simple one," Three-of-Twelve informed him yesterday. "The Functionist Council needs to ascertain the alt mode of an... aberrant individual."*

*Nightbeat raised a brow. To ask questions of a member of the Council is not politic. He asked anyway.*

*"Why me? I'm no alt mode expert."*

*"Don't you imagine that if we could dispose of the question that way, we would have?" There's an undertone of frustration that Nightbeat hasn't heard troubling that smooth, toneless voice before.*

"What do you mean? Either this - individual is refusing to transform and be examined, in which case, we know you've got ways of forcing the issue, or -" Even in small instances like this, it's always a good feeling when all the gears suddenly align and the light clicks on in Nightbeat's head. "Wait - do you mean the experts can't work out what he is?"

"I did not say that."

Nightbeat barely restrains the urge to let out a low whistle. "So - not a simple assignment, then."

The cold beam of Three's gaze still crawls underneath his plating every time, even after Nightbeat has spent so long as an investigator in the Council's employ.

"The matter requires investigation," Three intoned, after a long, awful pause during which Nightbeat managed not to squirm, but it was close. "You have frequently voiced a desire for more important tasks. Are you now asserting that you are not up to the job?"

"No, sir." Nightbeat realised that he'd just gotten Three-of-Twelve to admit that this was important.

"I need hardly remind you that failure will have consequences." That gaze again, like a searchlight raking across his inner wiring.

"No. Sir."



Nightbeat's companion suddenly stops speaking. At the edge of his awareness, Nightbeat clocks that he's been asked a question, but has to rewind the last few seconds in his memory to find it.

"Me? Not a lot of time for hobbies, really." That's true enough; his ongoing search for the answers to the Big Two - the missing Ark and the vanished moon - can't really be called a *hobby*. More of a compulsion. "So what do you do for work, buddy?"

The mech's smile doesn't exactly vanish, but it does fray at the edges. Fair enough; it's a question too close to the spinal strut to be polite. Only a step away from, "What do you turn into?" which is in itself just a sidelong shift from *what are you worth*. But the answer comes smoothly, without hesitation.

"I'm a psychiatrist."

*Well, frag.* "Alt mode exempt, then?"

"I - yes, it is, but I don't see what..." Now the smile is well and truly gone, as the mech sputters.

"And just what exactly *do* you turn into -"

"I believe that's enough of this conversation." Just as suddenly, the sputtering has stopped, and there's an echo of steel in the mech's voice. He pushes himself to his feet. "Good night."

Nightbeat shutters his optics and swears quietly. Undercover isn't his style; never has been. Time to do what he really does best, and just go right for the throat. "The Council sent me."

He can hear the other mech still.

"Oh." Nightbeat's companion circles back and sits down. His voice is resigned, heavy with it. "Well, then."

Nightbeat opens his optics. "I'm guessing you know why."

"I do. You're hardly the first they've sent to examine me."

The mech sighs and wrings his intertwined hands, then idly reaches up to fiddle with the thick, tinted spectacles obscuring his optics. And Nightbeat's ventilations abruptly stop.



"Oh... there is one more thing."

*Nightbeat pricked up his audials. Three's tone was deliberately casual, and yet the pause, the slight hitch in his voice, had not been calculated for effect. It sounded real.*

"What's that? Sir?"

"You are under no circumstances to look directly into his unshielded optics."

"Sorry, what?"



"He has been issued with protective spectacles, but should he remove them, do not look him in the optic."

Nightbeat frowned. "Why?"

"It is forbidden."

"Yeah, but -"

"Do not make me repeat myself."

Nightbeat reined himself in with an almost physical effort, and forced himself to simply nod before he left.



Nightbeat's gaze is riveted to those orange fingertips, playing along the edges of the glasses. For the briefest of seconds, it looks like they're going to ease the spectacles down, revealing the optics underneath - and then the mech catches him looking, and awkwardly folds his hands in his lap instead.

"Look," Nightbeat tries. "This doesn't have to be hard, if you're willing to help me. Wouldn't you rather find out your alt, anyway? Know who you are?"

"I find it interesting that you think that's the same thing," the mech says, so gently that it almost takes the sting out of it, but not quite.

"I -" Nightbeat bites down on the words *I don't*. He's dancing close enough to the edge with the Council as it is. His companion gives him a knowing look, though, and sighs.

"I will do whatever you ask of me. But I fear you'll end up disappointed, Detective...?"

"Nightbeat." A little belated, Nightbeat sticks out his hand, to find it enveloped in slender, surprisingly strong fingers.

"Rung."



The first thing Rung does - the next day, when they're alone in his quarters (strikingly close to the Functionist Council building - not under house arrest, exactly, but not free, either, and, Nightbeat knows with a grim certainty, *constantly observed*) - is simply... remove the wheel.

"Cosmetic," he shrugs, looking faintly embarrassed. "The Council told me it would make people less... uncomfortable."

Nightbeat is on him immediately, magnifying glass in hand. He examines every inch of the plating where the wheel sat. Nothing of note - a few scratches, paint chipped from long wear - and it's only after he lowers the magnifying glass that it occurs to him, *oh. That must be painful.*

Rung raises one of those impressive eyebrows when Nightbeat circles back around to face him. Nightbeat says, "Keep going."

It's generally considered impolite to stare when someone transforms, a fact that Nightbeat has had explained to him numerous times. He's never understood why. All alt modes are fascinating - the way those disparate bits of kibble suddenly click together, like the solution to a puzzle. And now, he has permission to watch. Frag, it's his job.

Rung's transformation is slow, almost as if he's grown unaccustomed to it, but graceful; the lines of his body become almost liquid as they arc into... into...

Nightbeat's seen the files, but he's still unprepared.

Ventilations caught in his throat, he leans close and slowly runs his gaze up every inch of the thing Rung has become. The already slender lines of Rung's body are stripped down, disassembled, into the sparest of curves, framing the gentle blue glow of his sparkplate. There's something... ancient, something almost alien, to the object in front of him, and the sheer mystery of it is singing along Nightbeat's wires like the crackle of electricity.

He crouches to get a better angle. His ventilation must brush against the surface he's examining so minutely, because as he watches, the plating - *Rung's* plating - shivers.

And suddenly it's harder to forget that it *is* Rung, there, underneath him. Not just a mystery, but a mech with a shy smile and clever hands, shivering at Nightbeat's proximity.



Nightbeat wants to make it happen again.

He takes a step back.

The rest of the examination is conducted at arm's length. When the time comes for Rung to change back, he turns so that Nightbeat can't see his face, and comes into robot mode tense, curled in on himself as he hugs his arms around his chest.

Nightbeat clocks it, but he's busy making notes and annotating the images he's captured, his mouth dry with excitement. "What was it the Council said you were?"

"Ornament."

"No." Nightbeat straightens and takes hold of Rung's shoulders. "I can tell you one thing right now - I've never seen a form that was so clearly designed for something. Whatever your alt is, it has a *purpose*."

Rung smiles thinly. "Of course. Everyone's alt mode does, doesn't it?"

"Not like this. What I just saw... You're remarkable, Rung."

To Nightbeat's surprise, Rung's cheeks flush a dark purple. Still, all he says is, "It seems to cause no end of trouble."



"So you've *never* known what it is you turn into?"

Nightbeat is holding a model spaceship steady for Rung to stencil its tiny name along the hull.

"How would I?" Rung returns. "When you first transformed, would you have known what your alt mode was, if other people hadn't told you?"

"Maybe not what it was *called*, but I knew what it did right away. The itch to transform was the same as the itch to drive, - frag, I think maybe I transformed *to* drive." He remembers running - he was so often running, even in those first few weeks of life, caught snooping where he wasn't supposed to - and then suddenly his wheels were hitting the tarmac and his engine was roaring, speeding to freedom. "Hang on. What do *you* get the itch to do when you transform?"

Without meaning to, he braces his arms and leans in as if he's conducting an interrogation; the gesture pulls the little spaceship out of Rung's reach, leaving him sitting with a paintbrush held in midair. Rung, however, looks more thoughtful than annoyed.

"I feel... full," he says, haltingly, after a long moment. "I don't think it's an urge to *do* something, as such, but I feel as I might after a large meal. Or... or as if I'm on the precipice of... something. Waiting."

Nightbeat has set the model ship down - carefully - and is making frantic notes. "And what brings it on? What makes you *want* to transform?"

"I couldn't tell you."

Nightbeat's optics narrow; Rung is looking guilelessly at him, but that answer was too quick and was very distinctly *not* 'I don't know'.



"What makes *you* want to transform?" Rung asks out of the blue, a few days later.

Nightbeat is helping him organise his library, this time. Rung jumped on the offer gratefully, although Nightbeat has noticed that there are some gaps in the shelves today, and a few volumes that Rung seizes when he spots them and immediately shoves behind bookcases or monitors, as if he thinks Nightbeat won't notice. Some books that aren't strictly government approved, then. It's not Nightbeat's department, so it's not Nightbeat's problem.

Still, it intrigues him. It sits pretty squarely outside the mystery of what Rung is, but it gnaws at Nightbeat's processor, and he doesn't know how to deal with things that do that except to pursue them.

Rung's question provokes a similar kind of gnawing. Nightbeat isn't used to subjects coming back with their own inquiries - real inquiries, at least, not, *How much are your masters on the Council paying you to pry into my affairs?* or *Do you honestly think you're on the right side?* "Is that - what did you say - psychiatry?" Nightbeat asks.



Rung smiles faintly. "Was it psychiatry when you asked me the same question?"

"It was my job."

"Well, it isn't my job -"

"Isn't it?"

"I mean, you're not my patient. I'm simply... interested."

Nightbeat tilts his head. Then he says, "Needing to go faster."

"Ah." Rung's smile turns a bit wry. "That, I'm afraid, I cannot relate to." He turns and picks up another datapad off the nearest stack, and holds it out to Nightbeat. Their fingers brush.

Nightbeat blurts out, "Panic."

He genuinely didn't mean to say it, but Rung doesn't look surprised. Instead, he just waits.

"I mean - not *panic*, but... needing to run. Chasing a clue, or getting away from someone..." Nightbeat trails off, his facial plating hot. If he's honest, the itch to transform is growing right now, but there's no such easy escape.

"The feeling of something gaining on you, or about to slip away," Rung says softly. "That seems a very natural response to me."

Nightbeat nods brusquely and turns to shelve the book, not really paying attention to whether he's put it in the right spot. He manages not to startle when he feels a small hand on his shoulder, but it's a near thing.

When he turns back, Rung smiles, "Shall we move on to the poetry shelf?" and squeezes Nightbeat's shoulder, just briefly.



"How many people have ever seen you transform?"

"Oh... only a handful, to be honest. Why, do you think the Council would allow us to consult more?"

"Probably not. Hey, hand me those edge pieces, I think they go over here."

"Certainly. Will you have some more tea?"



"Here." Nightbeat holds out the small mesh cushion. "For your back, where the wheel attaches."

For a second, he thinks Rung won't take it; the orange mech is gaping at him. Then, Rung lets Nightbeat place the cushion in his hand, and hugs it to himself. "You noticed," he says.

"That's my job, noticing."

"Yes, but you... well. Thank you, Nightbeat."



"I don't know how you can drink those things, Rung, but sure." Nightbeat grins and pushes to his feet. "Sweet energon spritzer it is."

Rung raises an eyebrow at Nightbeat's cube of unrefined lowgrade, now empty but still giving off fumes. "I could say something similar, but as you're being such a gentlemech, I won't."

Nightbeat laughs, and pauses after he's placed his order at the bar, half-turning to look back at Rung. It's the same booth where they first met, he realises. The view is technically the same, too, Rung sitting there all alone, but there's something relaxed about him that wasn't there before.

Nightbeat's smile fades. It's been weeks now, and he feels no closer to working out Rung's alt mode. Rung has been beyond accommodating, but Nightbeat has raked over every inch of his alt and every fiber of his history without success.



Normally, a mystery this stubborn would only whet his appetite, but there's something worse. Much worse. The truth is, Nightbeat is beginning to wonder whether he wants to close this case at all. Because the mystery of *what* Rung is feels like only a part of the more captivating mystery of *who* Rung is. And the minute he solves the first, he loses access to the second. Rung is kind, and he even seems to enjoy Nightbeat's company, but Nightbeat is his investigator, not his friend.

The bartender plonks two cubes down at Nightbeat's elbow, and nods in Rung's direction. "You here with that one? You're braver'n I am, mech."

"How's that?"

"*You know.*" His finger makes a rapid pass across both optics. "The curse."

"The what now?"

"The mech whistles low. "*You didn't know?* They say if you ever look in his optics - y'know, his bare optics, without those specs in the way - it'll destroy you. They say his eyes take a piece of you, and never give it back."

Nightbeat barely registers paying for the drinks. He barrels past a whole squad of trainee enforcers, ignoring their shouts, and flings himself back down opposite Rung. "Why do you wear those glasses?"

At Nightbeat's approach, Rung looks up, an open smile on his face, but the question makes his expression shutter immediately. "I take it you've heard the rumour."

"Why? Tell me."

"On the Council's orders."

"I know. That's not a why." Nightbeat takes a steady swig from his cube. "Your optics have some kind of - what, outlier ability? This could be the key to figuring out your alt if we just -"

"It isn't."

"What?"

"It isn't the key to anything, because there is no outlier ability. The rumours are just that. My optics have been seen without the shielding. Assessed." Rung smiles, and for once, it makes Nightbeat recoil. It's bland and serene and awful. "I have no wish to go through that again."

"But then why would the Council make you keep them hidden?"

"Why give me a wheel? They identified something they disliked, so they devised a way of hiding it. To make people more comfortable. But in this case, I believe it backfired."

Nightbeat takes in the scene around them with new optics: the regulars sneaking suspicious glances at Rung when he isn't looking, the other patrons not simply oblivious to Rung, as Nightbeat had assumed, but actively giving him a wide berth. No wonder he's been so lonely.

"Come on. We've got to be able to figure out between us if there's anything going on with your optics, and then we can straighten out this stupid scrap about a 'curse'. You *must* be sick of people treating you like a pariah." Nightbeat means it solely as an observation, but he sees Rung wince, and wonders if he should have put that more delicately. Niceties are hard, sometimes.

"Nightbeat..."

"I'm not allowed to look, but there are tests - outlier tests - what did -"

"Nightbeat, stop."

At Nightbeat's startled expression, Rung sighs.

"Look. Do you remember when I said you weren't the first person the Council had sent to investigate me? There was another operative. He was much like you: so determined, so intelligent. So terribly charming..." Rung swallows, the cabling bobbing in his throat. "And I let myself believe that his interest was truly in *me*, and not merely in my alt. I gave him everything he asked for."

"Including letting him examine your optics without the shielding."

"Including that. And immediately after, as he presumably had all the data he was going to gather from me, my 'dear friend' simply up and left without a word. I saw him in the street some weeks later, and he pretended not to even know me. So, no, Nightbeat." Rung stands up. "I will cooperate in your investigation, but you must stop pretending you care about me beyond that. I can't - I can't take that, again."



"*You set me up to fail!*"

"*Do you mean to tell me you have failed, Detective Nightbeat?*" Three-of-Twelve's voice is practically shedding ice.

"*I'm not finished yet,*" Nightbeat snarls, letting Three decide whether he means 'with the mission' or 'with you'. "Why didn't you tell me there was a previous investigation?"

"*I gave you to understand that experts had been involved -*"

"*This wasn't a few tests! You already sent an investigator who spent months with Rung, who talked to him, got him to open up - and then bailed on him! And the worst thing is, now Rung doesn't believe me when I -*"

Nightbeat shuts his mouth so fast it clicks, but not fast enough.

"*Yes?*" Three is looming dangerously close. "*When you... what?*"

"*Nothing, sir. Nothing.*" Nightbeat should turn and leave, he should, but - "*Can you at least tell me the real name of the operative you sent? So I can find out what he knows?*" And give him a piece of Nightbeat's mind, but the Council doesn't need to know that.

"*He knows nothing. He came back empty handed.*" Three draws his cloak around himself. "*He has been disciplined.*"

Nightbeat takes that last statement for both the closed door and the threat that it is, and leaves.



He doesn't see Rung for a week. He does manage to track down the investigator before him, based on hacked records and whispers, but the mech simply blinks when Nightbeat confronts him and pretends not to remember a "Rung", and nothing Nightbeat says or does convinces him to shake the act. Nightbeat passes Rung's street a dozen times, trying to come up with a new angle for his investigation, with -

With an excuse to go see Rung, even though he knows there's no more that Rung can give him.

He never finds it. Which is why, when Rung opens the door to him late at night a week later, Nightbeat just blurts out, "I'm lousy at pretending."

Rung stares at him. Waiting.

"That's why I fessed up that the Council sent me in the first place. It's why I don't do undercover work. What I do is find out the truth, not invent my own." He stops to search Rung's face. "So if it seems like I care about you, it's because I really do."

Rung once said that wanting to transform felt like being on the precipice. That's the way he looks now - poised, his optics wide behind smoked glass, hesitating right on the edge. He says, "The Council -"

Nightbeat looks around once, and then leans in to whisper right in Rung's audial. "Screw the Council."

And that's when Rung kisses him.



Rung is asleep on the sofa. Nightbeat is cradling a cooling mug of energon, watching.

*There must be something to it. A rumour is one thing, but the Council forbidding me to look at his optics - there has to be some kind of substance there.*

Rung's cheek is tucked against his arm, leaving his spectacles very slightly askew on his face. He must be dreaming, because his optics are cracked open, and in the gap, the tiniest sliver of blue light peeks out around his glasses. Nightbeat zeroes in on it like a laser scope.

*It would be so simple to find out.*

He reaches towards Rung.

And cups his cheek. "Psst," Nightbeat whispers. "Hey. Rung."

Those optics flutter all the way open, behind glass still. Rung smiles. "Hi."

"What were you dreaming about?"

Rung stills. Then, after a moment, he says - staring at his hands - "You asked me once what made me want to transform. It's... when I feel the urge to... unfurl. To open up to someone, to share something with them. To be seen. I..." His optics flash towards Nightbeat. "I want you to see me."

Nightbeat tilts his head, investigator kicking back in. "We're not talking about your alt mode anymore, are we?"

Rung shakes his head, and runs a finger over the rim of his glasses.

Then he stops, dropping his hand. "I'm just afraid... I suppose I've... *been* afraid. That once you saw everything there was to see about me, I'd lose you." He smiles, shakily. "You love mysteries."

"You don't have to be a mystery for me, Rung. Not when you're someone I can solve mysteries *with*." Nightbeat holds out his hand. "I'm not going anywhere."

Rung takes his hand, without looking; with his other, he reaches up -

The glasses are off, pinched between thumb and forefinger. Rung is trembling in front of him, one hand pressed desperately over his optics; his grip in Nightbeat's is shaking.

Nightbeat tightens his fingers. "It's all right."

Rung lets out what could almost be a sob.

Then he lowers his hand, and everything is blue.

From Rung's perspective, it looks like this:

Nightbeat's optics - always so sharp - widen behind his visor. For a nanosecond, they seem to white out, traces of static flickering in their depths, but it's gone so quickly Rung thinks he must have imagined it; and then it's just Nightbeat, mouth slightly agape, staring at Rung's bare optics with an expression Rung can't decipher.

"Nightbeat?"

And then Nightbeat beams bright enough to light up the room. "Beautiful," is all he says.



Rung's optics are familiar, like a full orchestra playing a song he's only ever heard in snatches. It's like he knows this light -

- he *knows* this light, images of ancient primes, the shape of Rung's alt, calculations flashing through his head, *the urge to share something*, that sacred blue -

*I know what Rung is.*

- the warmth of Rung's living fingers clutched in his, that shy smile, the way his expression softens when he listens, the way seeing his eyes feels like coming home -

*I know who Rung is.*

- coming home into that ancient sacred primal blue -

*No - frag - I know who Rung is -*

It's on his lips, a name that isn't "Rung" but, he knows now, *is* Rung, always has been -

And then everything starts to unravel.

Nightbeat tries to grab at the fraying wires of his own thoughts, but they jerk out of his grasp, sparking frantically in his darkening mind. He reaches for the last of those connections - reaches for Rung, and then -





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From Rung's perspective, it looks like this:

Nightbeat is gone.

He all but collapsed last night, exhausted, barely speaking - and then when Rung woke, his quarters were empty. No note, no ping on his comms. Nightbeat is easily caught up in new investigations, besides working for a set of capricious and uncompromising masters. It's not *that* strange.

It still gives Rung an uncomfortably tight feeling in his tanks. As hours pass, turn into days, with no word from Nightbeat, that feeling becomes an ache, one that's horribly familiar.

It's three days before Rung goes to find Nightbeat, and eventually spots him lounging against the back wall of a bar on the edges of the Dead End. As if on cue, Nightbeat turns towards him... and his gaze simply skips over Rung and moves on.

Rung steels himself to keep from shaking, and marches over.

"Nightbeat," he begins, his voice admirably steady, "you promised me -"

And Nightbeat turns to him, brow furrowed, and says, "Sorry, buddy, do I know you?"

Rung staggers back.

*Cursed*, is all he can think - far, far too late, as he stares into the optics that saw him once, and now peer through him like glass.

### Epilogue

Five million years of trials.

In the overwhelming flood of loss - a world lost to degradation, friends (or almost-friends) lost to death or disappearance, less tangible things lost almost without noticing - Rung still never forgets losing Nightbeat. Word of Nightbeat's death on a world called Gorlam Prime arrives much later, in dispassionate black and white in an after-action report, and in spite of the aeons in between, the news sits between Rung's chestplate and his spark and *aches*.

When Nightbeat pops up again - undead, at first, and then alive, *properly* alive - Rung can't help his joy, but he still keeps his distance. He does what he can to discourage Nightbeat's fascination with his alt mode, a strange relic of another life. He can't let Nightbeat get hurt again.

And then, one day, they voyage together to the underworld.



In the hollow beneath the Necrobot's planet, Nightbeat is reaching out for Rung - Rung, whom he wanted with him on this journey, wanted beside him more than anyone for reasons he didn't understand - at the moment when he looks up and sees the patterns of the vast central cavern, and he breaks.

The depths of the world glow blue, all around him is blue, like the flowers, like a half-remembered light from his dreams and Rung - Rung is saying something about how the formations above them are canals in reverse, worlds created to make other worlds, an ornament created to make the source of life, and *oh, Primus* -

***Oh. Primus.***

And everything is blue.

When Nightbeat comes to, he's curled on the floor, Rung cradling him and murmuring, "Nightbeat, my dear, can you hear me? Are you -"

"Rung." Nightbeat takes Rung's face between his hands, and looks into those optics, and has never been surer of anything in his life. "I remember. I remember you." He touches their foreheads together, as Rung lets out something between a sob and a laugh, sounding like it's been wrung out of him. "I see you."



ALL CYBERTRONIANS KNOW THAT IF A QUINTESSON JUDGE CAPTURES YOU IT WILL GIVE YOU ONE OF FIVE SENTENCES, ONE FROM EACH MASK THEY WEAR.



AS TIME PASSED, THEY WERE THOUGHT OF MERELY AS LEGENDS.

ONE WILL TURN YOU STONE. ONE WILL SCARE YOU TO DEATH.



ONE WILL TURN YOU TO RUST.

ONE WILL MELT YOU.

AND ONE WILL SAP YOUR WILL AND MAKE YOU ONE OF THEIR SERVANTS FOREVER.

THOUGH ONE STILL REMAINS, HIDING IN THE ANCIENT CATACOMBS UNDERGROUND, WHILE THE REST WERE DRIVEN FROM CYBERTRON.



ANY WHO ENTERED THE CATACOMBS NEVER RETURNED, AND OPTIMUS PRIME GREW WORRIED AS MORE OF HIS SCOUTS DISAPPEARED ONE BY ONE. HE WENT ALONE TO FIND THE EVIL THAT WAS LURKING THERE.



AS HE ENTERED THE TEMPLE HE SAW HIS FRIENDS IN THE THRALL OF A QUINTESSON SPELL.



IT IS GOOD TO SERVE THE QUINTESSONS...

IT IS GOOD TO NOT HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT MAKING CHOICES...

TO SURRENDER TO ANOTHER BEING...

HE FELT HIMSELF SLIPPING...

THE ONES HE CAME TO SAVE...

HE WAS GOING TO FAIL THEM...

BUT THEN,

THE MATRIX SPOKE TO HIM.

IT REMINDED HIM OF THE QUINTESSONS' EVIL, OF THE ONES HE WAS PROTECTING, AND THEN HE KNEW WHAT HE MUST DO.

THE QUINTESSON TURNED TO STONE, AND THEN DUST.

IF YOU RESIST US...

...THEN MAYBE YOU WOULD BE BETTER AS DECORATION!

NO!

AND THEN THOSE IN ITS THRALL WERE FINALLY FREE.

THE END

# Over the Mountains Where the Wildflowers Grow



**Author:** Whirlbird226

**Illustrator:** AbysmalKaiju



The countryside around Iacon had always appealed to Cliffjumper; it was equal parts the scenery and the complete and utter lack of anyone to bother him. While there were mecha who lived outside the main city of Iacon, they clustered together around farmsteads or guard outposts and there was plenty of empty space between those inhabited places. It made travel between various city-states both peaceful and dangerous.

Cliffjumper had never minded the inherent danger travel between city-states held, mostly because he enjoyed the silence. Iacon was always noisy. Mechs yelled at each other, sirens went off at all hours of the day and night, and not even the main temple of Primus was truly silent. But outside the city's walls, silence finally settled around Cliffjumper and the minibot found himself able to think again.

It wasn't as if he traveled a lot. He wasn't made of shanix after all, but at least once a vorn he left Iacon for a few weeks just to get away from everything. Cliffjumper took a deep invent of the fresh air, something he'd been missing dearly, and let out a heavy ex-vent. The weather was nice again, no clouds on the horizon threatening acid rain, and he let himself relax back in the sun.

He was in the perfect place for a nap. Most mechs would call him crazy, but the area had regular patrols of knights and a couple of smaller villages too. Cliff had been traveling for long enough to know when areas were generally safe and when they weren't.

It felt as if he'd just closed his optics and powered down when he was woken up by someone yelling at him. Cliffjumper sat up quickly, blinking his optics to clear them as he searched for the voice calling out to him. A lanky blue mech walked rapidly toward him, a relieved smile on their face. Something about the way the mech looked at him had dread coiling up in Cliffjumper's spark.

"Oh, I'm so glad it's you! I wasn't sure when I first spotted you, and I couldn't tell if you were injured or not. You aren't injured are you?" The mech asked once they'd gotten closer and Cliffjumper had scrambled to stand up. They were squinting at him now, optics roving all over his frame.

"No, I'm perfectly fine. Just taking a short rest before I move on." Cliffjumper paused, shifting closer to his bag. He wanted to be able to grab it if he needed to run. "And I'm sorry, but I think you've mistaken me for someone else. I've never met you before."

The mech's optics widened a bit. "Oh, no we've never met before, but I have heard about your exploits. We all have. In the village that is. And I'm glad you're alright, but it seems a bit weird to be resting when you're so close to our herding village." Cliffjumper frowned and was about to ask a question when the mech went on. "I mean, that is why you're out here, isn't it?"

Cliff snapped his mouth closed. The feeling of dread grew stronger and it took everything he had to not start fidgeting or just run away. *Not this slag again*, he thought and tried to smile a bit. "Look, mech, I think you have me confused with someone else. I'm not out here for any reason. I'm on vacation right now and I'm just traveling."

They frowned and somehow the feeling only got worse. "No, that can't be right. We sent off a letter for help weeks ago. You're Bumblebee, you're supposed to help us."

Cliffjumper was about to deny all of that when the mech jerked forward and snagged his arm, nearly pulling him off his pedes in their haste. "Woah, hold on! Let me go!" He snarled, digging his heels into the ground and trying to twist his arm free.

They didn't listen to him, only tugged harder at his arm. Pain lanced its way up into his shoulder and Cliffjumper gritted his denta.

"Come on, at least let me grab my stuff and I'll agree to go with you to your village." He tried next, hoping they'd listen to that at least.

They narrowed their pale blue optics at him, servo tightening around his arm painfully. "No, I don't trust you to not run off. I'll send someone back here for it once we get back to my village. It's not that far away and not a lot of mechs come by here. It'll be fine."

Cliffjumper glared at the mech, but was forced to follow them when they turned and started to drag him with them. He wasn't about to fight it. It wouldn't get him anywhere, but maybe they'd drop their guard eventually and he could get out of this. He really felt stupid for getting so close to one of the outer villages though, he *knew* to stay far away from them for this very reason. He had been unfortunate enough to be sparked with the same frame of another mech. A mech who'd ended up with everything.

The village wasn't far, which was the only thing Cliffjumper was thankful for. He still felt incredibly stupid for resting so close to a village though. And it really was a village. It was so small, consisting of a few buildings on either side of the road and a larger, main building right where the road split. It also happened to be the building he was being dragged toward.

Mechs poked their helms out of doorways and windows or looked up from what they were doing to stare at them. Cliffjumper hated it all. He especially hated when the mech dragging him started to shout loudly and walk quicker.

"The elder, where's the elder?" He called out once they got closer to the central building. Cliffjumper managed to catch a glimpse between a few buildings and saw rolling fields full of what looked like sheepatron grazing and a few more houses too. "I have a Knight of Primus with me."

"I told you already, you have me confused with someone else." Cliffjumper snarled, glaring at the mech's back.

The blue mech stopped and turned to face him suddenly, nearly pulling Cliff off his pedes. "Stop lying to me. You aren't fooling anyone. You're just trying to get out of a difficult job."

Cliffjumper started to reply, but got cut off. It was probably for the best. He'd been about to make things worse. So much worse.

"What is the meaning of all this shouting?" An old mech asked, slowly descending the short stairs up to the main building. Cliffjumper was assuming this was the town elder.

"Sir, I found this mech right near the village. I think he's trying to run off though, he keeps claiming he's not Bumblebee. But, I mean, look at him." The mech let go of Cliffjumper's arm to wave a servo at him.

Cliffjumper glared as the elder looked up and down his frame. He also refused to rub at the obvious servo marks around his lower arm. "My name isn't Bumblebee. I'm not a Knight of Primus."

The older mech huffed. "If you wanted anyone to believe that, you should've better disguised yourself. Painting yourself red wasn't enough to fool anyone with optics."

Cliffjumper's armor just about started to rattle at how tightly he had to hold himself back from jumping the mech. Why did he have to keep going through with this slag? And now there was no running. The shouting had drawn a small crowd which gathered around them. There weren't a lot of mechs, Cliff could make a run for it, but he already knew it wasn't worth it. That was probably the most frustrating part about all of this; his complete lack of control over anything that happened.

When he still didn't reply the elder huffed out a wheezing vent. "Fine, are you going to abandon your oaths or are you going to actually fulfill them?"

Cliffjumper took a deep invent, noting the other villagers that had arrived by this point. He looked off over the elder's shoulder when he responded. "I never took any oaths, but since you won't listen, what is it you think I'm supposed to be doing out here?"

"Show your elders a little respect," someone spat behind him. Cliffjumper didn't look. It wasn't worth his time, but he did flinch at how loud and close the voice was.

The elder lifted a servo to quiet the mech. "We sent for a mech to help us deal with the Iaconi Dragon. It's been spotted in the area and raided another village not too long ago."

Cliffjumper felt his spark shiver and pulled his field in close, slicking his armor to his side. "Are you insane? No one mech can handle something like that on their own!"

"Quiet! You'll do as you're supposed to. You took oaths of loyalty and protection. It is not our fault you were sent alone. You will do this, or I will send our fastest runner to Iacon proper and everyone will be notified of how you've left your post."

He didn't need to say any more. Cliffjumper's spark practically wilted in his chest. That was a death sentence to both himself and Bumblebee. The hunter's wouldn't care who they ran across, or if they ran across two mechs who looked similar. All they cared about was fixing a mistake. Cliffjumper wouldn't even get the chance to explain himself.

"Fine," he spat out, finally meeting the elder's optics to glare at them. "But I don't have anything to fight a dragon with."

"Don't worry about that. We have equipment here you can use." He waved servo and a different mech stepped forward to glare down at Cliff, "Axel will make sure you have all you need for your battle."

The mech sneered at Cliffjumper and Cliff knew whatever weaponry they had would be nothing to one of the ancient predacons that still roamed Cybertron's surface. Still, he followed after the mech. He might as well be as ready as he could for whatever he was about to face.



Cliffjumper stood in the center square again feeling absolutely ridiculous. The armory had been a complete joke. The weapons barely deserved to be called weapons and all the armor had been made for mechs at least twice his size. At least there had been one lance Cliff could wield that looked like it would hold up for more than one blow. He also had found a usable sword that was actually sharp and had it strapped to his hip.

"Good," the elder said as he came to a stop in front of Cliffjumper. "You are not to return until you've defeated the beast and have something to prove it's dead. Its spark chamber should do well since I doubt you could drag its helm back here."

Cliffjumper hated the mech even more somehow. "That's all well and good, but where am I even supposed to find it?"

The elder glared at him. "Show a little respect, you're a member of a prestigious group and you speak for them." When Cliff didn't budge the elder mech let out an annoyed vent but continued. "The beast has made its home somewhere at the base of the mountains. There's a path up the hill to an area it's been seen frequenting. I'm sure you are more than capable of doing a little tracking once you get there or at the very least can figure out how to attract its attention."

"Yeah, sure, as long as it's in the area and not out hunting or anything like that." Cliffjumper sneered, shifting his weight.

"It already attacked a village closer to the mountains a few days ago, so it shouldn't be out," the blue mech said, but he still looked up at the sky to make sure the dragon wasn't going to drop out of it and onto them.

Cliffjumper rolled his optics at them all, readjusted his grip on the lance and started to turn away. "I'll go find your dragon and deal with it." He muttered.

He didn't try to listen to anything that was muttered behind his back as he walked away, it wouldn't do anything for him anyways and it wasn't like any of the villagers had any advice to offer or any help to give him. No one had even gone to grab his things. They were probably still sitting next to the road. The mini thought about going and grabbing them and running for it. No one was paying him any attention right now anyways. They'd all gone back to their own business. It would be easy.

The ground dipped down next to him as the road continued up a slight incline. He could easily slide down the incline and be out of sight. From there it would be easy to retrace his steps to where he'd stopped earlier and now he knew where he needed to be to avoid any of the villagers. He stopped in the road and looked around again before sighing.

It wouldn't be worth it at the end of the day. Too many mechs had seen him and knew what happened. This village traded frequently with Iacon and it was entirely possible that they'd either see him or Bumblebee later on or would report the incident to the Knights of Primus and it would be all over. Cliffjumper would never be allowed to go home again. He wouldn't be able to go into any village or city for fear of being recognized or mistaken again. Not to mention, if he did run, it wouldn't be his reputation he'd be tarnishing.

He sighed heavily and kept walking down the road toward the looming mountain range. There wasn't anything he could do to get out of this aside from facing the dragon. He'd either die fighting, or be lucky enough to wound the monster before dying himself. Either way, he doubted he'd be getting out of this encounter alive, even with the little training he had.



The path can barely be called that. Cliffjumper stares at the slightly worn ground that's the same width of a normal sized mech and sighs. He looks around the clearing he's in, crystal trees towering over him and chiming in the gentle breeze. *At least it's pretty here*, he thinks. And it is. The crystals are all a pale, nearly translucent, blue with a light lavender center and the tin-steel grass under his pedes is soft and spotted with small violet blooms. Still, he would enjoy it a lot more if he wasn't about to die. Probably. He'd never been trained to fight monsters.

Cliffjumper took a few steps toward the path when a deep, gravely voice spoke up behind him. "Now, what would a small mech like yourself be doing all the way out here armed like that?"

Cliffjumper spun around, optics wide as a massive, blue and white dragon, lunged at him, jaws wide open. He dove, rolling out of the way just as the jaws snapped close right where he'd been standing. His vents came in rapid and ragged as he got in a fighting stance, the lance held out in front of him at the ready.

"Well, that was rude of you," the dragon sneered.

Cliffjumper didn't think they could talk, but he tried to not let that bother him. "It's rude to randomly attack someone minding their own business."

"Armed like that? I doubt you're here to mind your own business."

"It's dangerous out here, why shouldn't I be armed?" Cliff snapped back, plating bristling up to make him look bigger. He doubted it would work, but it was a normal reaction to threats.

"Oh, you're right about that." The monster chuckled somewhere deep in his chest and Cliffjumper swore he felt it vibrate through his frame.

He lunged again, this time with his front paws. Cliffjumper rolled out of the way, coming up closer than he'd like to the massive dragon's body and jabbed at its chest with his lance. It reeled back, a little too slow as the lance grazed over the spot where his spark was. With a vicious snarl, the dragon twisted and snapped its beak at the red mini. Cliffjumper jumped back, swinging the lance around so it was in front of him.

The monster laughed as it leapt back. The ground shook when he landed. "You're better than the last knight they sent to kill me."

Cliffjumper couldn't tell if he was grinning or snarling and the mini didn't think it really mattered all that much at this point. "I'm not a knight," he snapped back, sick and tired of trying to explain that simple concept.

"Really?" The dragon cocked its helm, optics narrowing. "Could've fooled me."

Something about the way the dragon moved and his speech pattern was giving Cliffjumper a weird feeling. Why would something seemingly this intelligent mindlessly attack villages? It just didn't make any sense. Unless the idiots had attacked it first, which, honestly, made a lot of sense. They weren't the smartest mechs out there and Cliff knew a lot of mecha who attacked first and never bothered to question things.

He shifted his stance to keep the dragon in front of him when it started to pace a slow circle around him. It lunged again with little warning. Cliffjumper rolled toward the dragon, narrowly missing its massive claws and jabbed the lance upwards. The dragon screamed in agony when his lance struck its shoulder, its own momentum forcing the weapon deeper into its plating and protoform than Cliffjumper would've been able to do on his own. The dragon spun away, swatting at Cliffjumper with a paw as it moved. Cliffjumper didn't have time to move away and the back of the dragon's paw collided with him. Cliffjumper went flying, tumbling down a short hillside and landing heavily on his back some ways away.

Everything hurt. His first vent wheezed in as he tried to get his ventilation systems working properly again. He'd lost the lance somewhere, probably in the dragon's shoulder, and it was far too much work to get any of his limbs moving like he wanted them too. The mini could hear an angry, pained roar from somewhere up the hill and then the sound of a massive, angry mech charging through the crystalline forest.

Cliffjumper forced his limbs to work, pushing himself up and wobbling onto his pedes. He managed to draw his sword as the dragon broke through the forest and into the open glade at the top of the hillside. Energon flowed freely from the hole in its shoulder where the lance had impaled it. So maybe the lance was somewhere else, not that Cliffjumper had any hope of finding it again. It was probably in that first clearing.

Still, Cliffjumper forced his frame to listen to him, dropping into a ready stance and eyeing the seething dragon. It snarled, energon flowing out around its beak and Cliffjumper got a decent look at the razor sharp teeth hidden just inside the monster's maw. The mini was sure his sword would be useless in this fight, but he wasn't about to give up or run away. He didn't have anywhere he could go even if he managed to get away from the predacon.

"You're brave, I'll give you that. It's been a long time since anyone managed to land a blow on me," the dragon said.

Slowly, carefully, the dragon picked its way down the hillside. Cliffjumper shifted his stance a bit more, bringing the sword up defensively. For some reason this only made the monster grin at him. The red mini didn't know why he knew that was a grin and not something else, but he did. He frowned.

"What's so funny?" he snapped and somehow that grin turned downright smug.

"Oh, there's nothing funny about this. Did you miss the compliment I just gave you? I thought it was obvious."

Cliffjumper frowned even more, mostly in confusion. He had to shift back as the dragon came even closer, stepping down from the steep hillside and into the open glade with him. He was shocked when the dragon stopped, cocking its massive helm and looking him over with a critical optic.

"Well it wasn't obvious to me," Cliffjumper finally snapped back.

"Then let me make it clear for you," it began and shifted to take some of its weight off its injured shoulder. "In over a thousand vorns, no one has managed to land a blow on me that caused any sort of injury beyond a scuff. So congratulations."

Cliffjumper blinked at the massive predacon who was still just standing and looking at him. He didn't like that at all. "Why are you looking at me like that? Aren't you going to fight me?" he snapped out, plating bristling under the scrutiny. He wasn't used to it.

"If that's what you want," it began, "But that feels like such a waste to me."

"What?" Cliffjumper said inelegantly and his stance went a bit lax.

"I said fighting you would be a waste." The dragon moved forward and Cliffjumper could only stare, mouth dropping open as it stepped right into a complex transformation sequence. The mech wavered a bit, but managed to keep on his pedes, shoulder bleeding even more than it had previously been thanks to half its components shifting somewhere else. "We can keep fighting if you want, but what would be the purpose? The most likely outcome of that would definitely be one of us dying. Possibly even both of us if you get in another good hit."

Somehow Cliffjumper managed to get his vocoder working again. "I can't go back, they expect me to kill you or die trying."

The mech cocked his head to the side again, looking over Cliffjumper's frame before he came to his decision. "Then I offer you this choice, either come with me and if we are compatible, be my mate, or we can go back to fighting and if I survive, I'll raze the entire valley. I'll never bother anyone here again if you come with me, even if it doesn't work out between us."

"I— what?" Cliffjumper just stared at the massive beastformer, trying to understand what he'd just been offered. It almost didn't sound real. The wound on his shoulder hadn't stopped bleeding yet and the mini began to wonder if there had been something vital there that he'd managed to hit. He knew his own plating was dented in at least two spots and something was pressing against his T-cog in a very uncomfortable way.

"I think you heard me," the mech said. "Agree to come with me and I'll leave the valley alone, or we go back to fighting pointlessly."

Cliffjumper lowered his sword, staring up at the massive dragon. Maybe he'd hit his helm at some point rolling down the hillside. This couldn't really be happening. But if it was, if there was even the slightest chance that it was real, then why shouldn't he take the beastformer up on his offer? There wasn't anything waiting for him back in Iacon. He wouldn't be able to defeat the beastformer on his own, and he couldn't run off either. Not that running had ever been an option.

"Well?" The dragon prompted, offering his servo, palm up, to Cliffjumper.

Cliffjumper looked at it. He knew nothing about the mech. It wasn't really much of a choice, but it was more of a choice than the villagers or anyone else had ever given him before. He reached out, hesitating with his servo hovering just above the beastformer's larger servo.

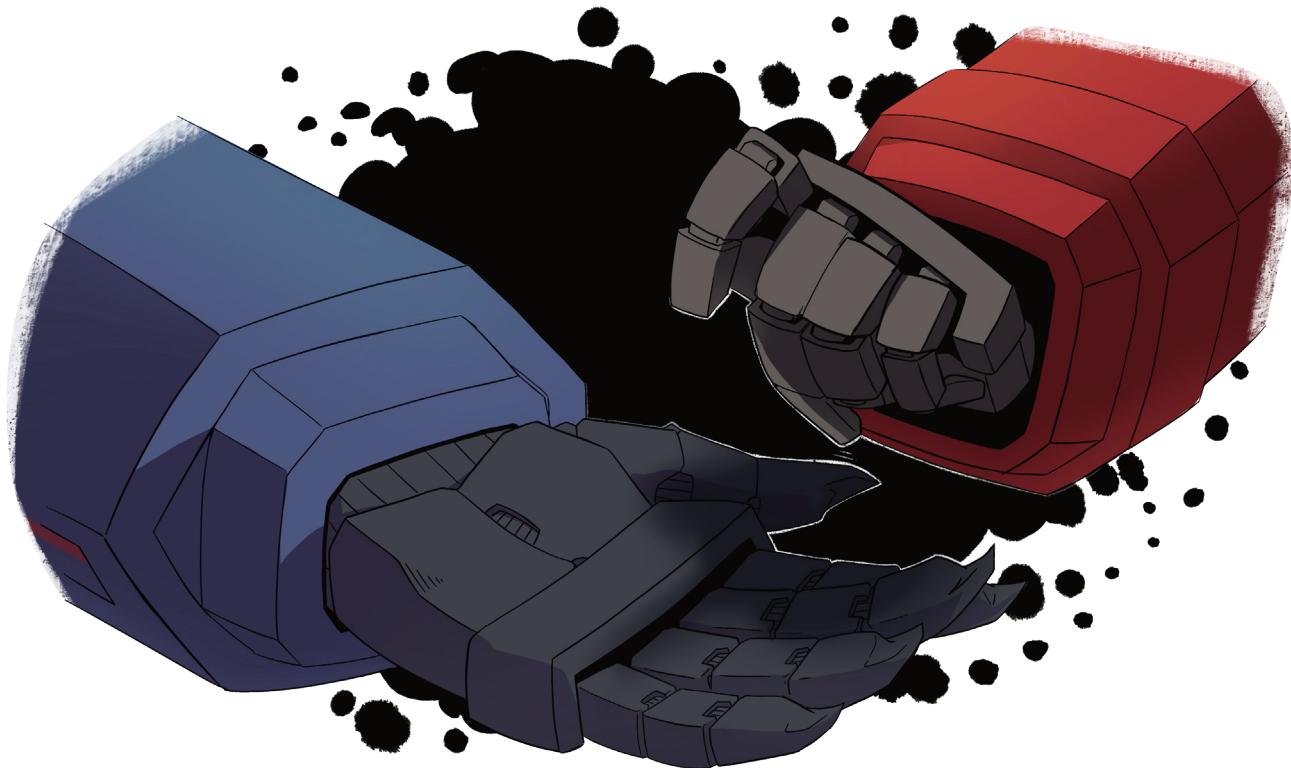
"I don't even know your designation."

"The villagers call me Deathsaurus, but my actual designation is Dezarus."

"Cliffjumper," he said and laid his servo on Dezarus'.

The mech grinned, curling his claws gently over Cliff's. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Cliffjumper."

A shiver worked its way down Cliff's spinal strut, his digits flexing against Dez's palm. "Likewise."







# Mech Door Hand Hook Shuttle Door



**Author:** Enfilade

**Illustrator:** Aktosage

*Around the time of the Overlord incident on the Lost Light*



The Lost Starship Graveyard had been high on the list of places in the universe that Fulcrum never, ever wanted to visit.

There was nothing supernatural about the Lost Starship Graveyard. Solar winds through the asteroid fields created a jet stream, so if your ship lost its engines in this sector—for example, from an asteroid strike—it would eventually end up here. Worse, pirates used the asteroids as cover for ambushes, leaving even more dessicated hulks drifting through the Lost Starship Graveyard. But statistically speaking, this sector had no more “mysterious mishaps” than any other.

Which meant absolutely nothing to Fulcrum as the Scavengers lit a fire inside an empty fuel drum on the bridge of the *Marie Celestial*, a Cybertronian barquentine lost during the age of the Thirteen Primes. Fulcrum wished Grimlock was around, but the Dynobot was sound asleep in the W.A.P. and everyone knew better than to wake him up. Grimlock was cranky and a little homicidal when he was overtired.

“Spooky,” Misfire said, touching the captain’s wheel.

“Can’t we go back to the W.A.P.?” Fulcrum asked Krok. “Please?”

“And miss the chance to party on the infamous *Marie Celestial*? We finally found her in amongst all these derelicts; we deserve to celebrate. Tomorrow we’ll finish loading up the good stuff and head for Troja Major.”

Spinister dropped a load of combustibles near the fire. “Why’d we take this job?”

“Because the W.A.P. is making that rattling sound again,” Crankcase replied, “and this time duct tape isn’t going to be enough.”

“Repairs cost money,” Krok said, “and Ag...sorry, the Curator...is paying big for mementos from the *Marie Celestial*.”

“What’s mementos?” Spinister asked.

“That’s the good part—it’s basically *anything*. The Curator promised me some cool-looking bits for our share.”

Crankcase frowned. “I don’t want any...bits.”

“Sure you do.”

Crankcase looked blank. Fulcrum was pretty sure he did, too.

“Think about it,” Misfire urged. “We get back with proof we were here and people will pay big money for whatever we say is a bolt or nail or scrap of metal from the ghost ship *Marie Celestial*.”

“Ohhhh,” Crankcase replied.

“Don’t you think lying about it will make the ghosts mad?” Spinister asked.

Fulcrum groaned. “There’s no such thing as ghosts, Spin.”

“ISN’T THERE?” Misfire said in a spooky voice. “Did I tell you guys Flywheels saw the Necrobot once?”



"Did I tell you guys Flywheels's ghost appears over my bed at night?" Crankcase said dryly.

Fulcrum shivered. "He does not."

"Does too."

"He'd better not. I mean, what would I even say to him? *Sorry I took your place on the team after the DJD gruesomely murdered you?*"

"Are you, though?" Spinister looked hurt. "Sorry to be here?"

"No, Spin." Fulcrum looked around the rotting bridge and added, "At least, I'm not sorry to be *with you*. Being *here* on a ghost ship is another story."

"Come on, Fulcrum," Misfire said. "Once you've escaped the DJD, nothing will ever scare you again. I learned that the *first* time I had a run-in with Vos."

Fulcrum couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're telling me you lot have fought the DJD before?"

"Well, not *all* of us. Me and Thundersaur. Like three million years ago, back when some of the DJD guys were different. The old Vos was a big scary dude with hooks for hands *and* feet. I mean, how does that even work?" Misfire gave his head a shake. "Anyway, Thundersaur and I take some leave time, rent a shuttle, and fly to Monacus for a straight week of partying. Except that Thundersaur...well, you know the DJD got him in the end, right? When we went to Monacus, he was *already on the List*."

Misfire proceeded to tell a long, rambling story about the trip to Monacus and all the creepy stuff that happened there: a constant feeling of being watched, their hotel room trashed, their comms tapped, shadows flickering in the corners of their optics wherever they went. Finally Thundersaur lost his nerve and insisted they go home early. During pre-flight checks they heard a weird scratching noise against the shuttle's hull, and on the takeoff roll, Thundersaur complained about drag on the starboard fuselage. They'd barely reached space when the control console reported a hull breach on the shuttle's starboard side. Thundersaur made an emergency landing on a nearby moon...

"And *then*," Misfire said, "I opened the bay doors and went around the shuttle and I saw Vos's hook-hand just dangling from the starboard hatch!"

Spinister gasped.

Crankcase shivered.

And Fulcrum rolled his optics. "Seriously, Misfire?"

Misfire was the picture of righteous indignation. "I open up to you about my trauma, and *this* is all the sympathy I get?"

"Are you for real? *Everybody* knows that story. Guyhawk used to tell it *all the time*. Only in his version, it's about him and Leozack, and Leozack blasts Vos off the shuttle with Deathsaurus's Living-Metal-Destroying Cannon."

Crankcase raised an optic ridge. "Is it really called that?"

Fulcrum pressed his lips together. "Yes. It is really called that."

Misfire's optics grew misty. "That's so awesome I think I'm going to pass out."

"It's the stupidest name ever!" Fulcrum exploded.

"Wow, don't blow up on me there, bomb-boy."

Fulcrum tried to think up a scathing retort, but Krok spoke first.

"I have another story." Krok lowered his voice to an ominous whisper. "A tale of a killer who stalked the streets of Iacon by night, leaving a trail of decapitated corpses in his wake. They say...they never...found the heads...."

Fulcrum facepalmed. "Yeah, we all know you and Agonizer were buddies during the war."

"Shut up, Fulcrum, you just ruined it."

Spinister scratched his head. "The story about the Headhunter is really true? Am I supposed to be extra scared now?"



Crankcase snorted. "Describing stuff somebody did in the war isn't scary."

Misfire poked Crankcase. "It is if you're an Autobot."

"Thank you," Krok said.

"We're not Autobots, though," Crankcase protested.

Krok turned to Crankcase. "The idea is, I don't tell anyone that the Headhunter story is just Agonizer grousing about his old job. Then the audience thinks that maybe, just maybe, the Headhunter is still on the prowl and they might be the next target."

"Wait," Spinister interrupted. "First Fulcrum's mad that the hook story is fake, and now he's mad because the Headhunter story is real?"

"I don't know why we have to talk about scary stuff at all," Fulcrum retorted. "Can we talk about literally anything else? I mean, I threatened *Tarn* and I cannot wait to forget that it ever happened."

Misfire grinned. "That's gonna make a radical story."

"Misfire, I am never going to tell that as a...a campfire story."

"Sweet, then I can. Will you be mad if I take the stuff you did and turn it into stuff I did?"

"But you're not a K-Con!"

"I'm not a K-Con right now," Misfire said smugly. "The audience won't know what I used to be."

Fulcrum's disapproving gaze swung between Misfire and Krok. "So what you two are telling me is that the best stories are lies."

"Hey dummy," Crankcase. "You could say they're telling you that their stories are big steaming piles of slag and there's nothing to be afraid of."

Fulcrum looked at Crankcase warily. "That's...surprisingly nice of you."

Crankcase shrugged. "If you have nightmares again, you're sleeping in someone else's hab this time."

"You can sleep in mine," Misfire offered.

"I'm bored," Krok said. "Somebody tell a story."

"Oh!" Spinister stood up. "Me."

Crankcase narrowed his optics. "You're gonna tell a story. You."

"Yeah."

"Whatever."

Spinister rubbed his hands together in excitement. "Once upon a time, there was...a ghost!"

The other Scavengers watched him expectantly.

Spinister blinked. "Oh. Um. It...chased me?"

"Okay..." Krok said with a skeptical expression.

"It...caught me!"

"Uh huh..."

"And I...died! Now I'm a ghost too!" Spinister raised his hands over his head. "Oogie boogie!"

Fulcrum groaned.

Spinister took a step closer to Fulcrum and suddenly screamed at the top of his lungs. Startled, Fulcrum screamed too. Crankcase jumped, Krok shrieked and Misfire joined in with a long ululating wail that went on long after everyone else got their wits about them.

"Nicely played," Krok said to Spinister.

Spinister plopped into his seat. "What?"

"Never mind. Crankcase, you're up."

"This strut-chilling story is more terrifying than anything that any of you could ever imagine. It's called *What Happens When Someone Changes the Seat Settings on the W.A.P.'s Pilot's Chair.*"

"Five minutes of being threatened by you is *not* a story," Krok said firmly.

"Fine. Then let me tell you about this guy from flight school who got dared by his unit commander to go down into the Polyhex Crypt and bring back something to prove he'd done it."

"He had to grave-rob?" Misfire blinked. "He couldn't just take video?"

"Said like someone who wouldn't be up to his elbows in stolen artifacts the first chance he got," Fulcrum muttered.

Crankcase glared at Misfire. "You know the Polyhex Crypt is cursed, right?"

"There's no such thing as..." Fulcrum started to say.

Misfire cut him off. "Are you saying you can't get cursed for taking video in the crypt? Like, the restless dead are cool with that?"

Crankcase snapped, "The curse is for disturbing the tombs, okay?"

"You can get cursed by video," Spinister said helpfully. "There's this clip on the extranet that if you see it, you'll die seven days later."

Fulcrum sighed. "Spinister, you're so stupid that I could tell you *any* clip on the extranet was a cursed video and you probably *would* die seven days later."

"Everybody shut up!" Crankcase shouted.

"I knew a guy in basic training," Krok said, "who went down to the Polyhex Crypt *just for a peek* and didn't disturb *anything*..." He glared at Misfire and added, "or take video, and they *still* found his corpse laid neatly in the grand hall, all done up like for a funeral, except with *all his internal organs missing*."

"Hey! This is *my* story!" Crankcase gave Krok a shove.

"Sorry," Krok said. He didn't look sorry.

"Now you've spoiled the ending." Crankcase glowered. "Fulcrum, you go while I think of a better story."

"No, I don't think I will." Fulcrum summoned all his courage and rose to his feet. "I don't like horror stories and I think I should go back to the W.A.P. and recharge before you lot stop fighting and actually tell a ghost story scary enough to keep me up all night."

Misfire booed loudly.

Spinister jumped to his feet. "Is there something scary and should I be shooting it?"

Krok and Crankcase immediately jumped to *their* feet. Crankcase took hold of Spinister's arms while Krok talked him down. Fulcrum took advantage of the distraction to escape.

Misfire called after him. "Wait! You can sit next to me and I'll protect you!"

But Fulcrum was fed up. Angry enough to barely pay attention to the cold breeze whispering from the *Marie Celestial's* not-yet-entirely-failed circulation system, or the crackling static from internal comms that hissed like sparks tumbling into the Inferno, or anything else that would ordinarily have him jumping in fear.

Stalking through the boarding tube back to the W.A.P., Fulcrum found himself in a mood foul enough to rival Crankcase on a bad day. It wasn't that he was *ungrateful* for being rescued from Clemency. It wasn't as though he didn't *appreciate* having the kind of friends who would help you fight the DJD. It wasn't even the stupid squabbling, which Fulcrum enjoyed more than he wanted to admit—his old terraforming team had been a quiet and dour bunch. It was mostly just...sometimes the other Scavengers were *tiring*. They didn't always do a great job of listening to other people. Or a great job of taking anything seriously.

Tomorrow, Fulcrum would sit down with Krok and find a solution to the ghost story problem. Maybe Krok could help Fulcrum get the team into something else, like Galactic Wrestling Federation, or Jenga, or Cogs of Combat Online, or...or *anything* Fulcrum didn't hate.

But for tonight, Fulcrum was going to be stuck in his hab, trying not to think about all the stupid scary slag he'd just heard, or how urban legends suddenly got a lot more believable when you were alone in the dark.



Fulcrum opened his hab suite door and caught sight of the projects on his workbench, including his newest: the communications panel from the *Marie Celestial's* bridge. Maybe he could distract himself with some tinkering.

It wasn't fair. Everyone else was having a great time and Fulcrum was the one who had to suffer because of *their* thoughtlessness.

Suddenly, Fulcrum had an incredible idea.

Before he could lose his nerve, he powered up the *Marie Celestial's* comm unit. Then he dialed in the others' comm frequencies, made his voice as low as he could, and whispered, "Do you know where your friends are?"

"Hello?" Krok's voice came over the link.

Fulcrum cut the transmission.

Then he collapsed into his desk chair and slung his arm over his optics. He'd never...he'd never *pranked* anyone before. He had always been the butt of other people's pranks.

Well, he wasn't a cowardly technician any more, and he wasn't a helpless K-Con, either. He was a Scavenger, and if he didn't give as good as he got, he'd find himself condemned to a humiliating fate as the butt monkeycon of the crew.

Fulcrum knew he couldn't radio them again right away. He'd let the others go back to telling ghost stories and snarking amongst themselves first. He started messing with his new salvage to fill the time. Soon he was completely engrossed in an old data drive, so much so that he lost track of his surroundings until a voice came echoing through the corridor.

"Radar?"

Fulcrum jumped, fuel pump hammering a mile a minute. He could hear footsteps outside his door.

"Nacelle? Redwing? You guys alive?"

Fulcrum felt a wash of relief when he realized the voice was familiar. Still, he drew his pistol before sticking his head out into the hallway, just in time to see Krok's back vanish around the corner.

"Talk to me, Radar."

Fulcrum felt his fuel tank sink.

He'd thought for sure that *Krok* at least would recognize the urban legend that had inspired Fulcrum's creepy transmission. But Krok's behaviour suggested that he was so desperate to find *his friends* that he'd taken it seriously. And since Krok's *current* unit was sitting around a campfire, Fulcrum could guess that Krok was calling the names of his *old* team, the mechs they were searching for all over the galaxy.

Fulcrum had his own suspicions about what had happened to those guys, considering there'd been a war for longer than most of the Scavengers had been alive. If his suspicions were correct, he'd just been a grade-A exhaust pipe to the leader of the team that saved his life.

Feeling guilty, Fulcrum stepped out into the corridor. Krok must have heard the noise, because he came running back around the corner. "Ra...oh, Fulcrum."

"I'm sorry," Fulcrum whispered, hanging his head, only now remembering that the Scavengers were occasionally inclined to eat people and maybe pissing them off was the stupidest thing he'd ever done. "That was me on the radio."

Krok did a double take.

"It's just..." Fulcrum felt like he was on trial for his life again, trying to justify his ignominious retreat and subsequent weeks on the run to Deathsaurus, knowing there was nothing he could say or do to escape a death sentence from his own commander. "I hate creepy stuff," Fulcrum said lamely. "The rest of the guys won't stop telling ghost stories and I have to pick between spending the night scared out of my mind or spending the night alone while everyone else has fun, and I'm sick of it."

"You mean that transmission was a joke?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Pfft." Krok slapped Fulcrum on the back. "I didn't think you had it in you."





"Now we give 'em something to find." Krok snatched the goggles off Fulcrum's head.

"Hey!"

"Flush your lines and chill. You'll get them back." Krok laid the goggles on the floor, grabbed a canister, and splashed pink liquid all around them.

"What is that stuff?"

"The old coolant Crankcase drained out of the port engine last month. We don't have enough energon to waste on jokes, but if we're lucky, the others won't check too closely."

Fulcrum had to admit that, yeah, it *did* look like something had gotten him, leaving only his goggles and a splatter of energon behind. "Now what?"

"Now we go hide and wait for them to find it."

"Are we gonna, like, jump out at them and scare them?"

"Pfft, you are really on fire tonight, Fulcrum."

"Because, um, I was gonna say, that sounds like a great way to get shot."

"Ah, it's fine. Misfire couldn't hit you if he tried and Spinister always aims low, so just remember to jump."

Fulcrum wanted to argue that this wasn't a game of Shoot Shoot Bang Bang, but Krok pulled him into a corridor and put a hand over his mouth to keep him quiet.

"The noise came from up here." That sounded like Misfire.

"Ever wonder how smart it is to go looking for something you don't want to find?" Crankcase grumbled.

Spinister answered. "Ever wonder how smart it is to let something you don't want to find, find you first?"

"What's that?" Misfire asked suddenly.

"It's Fulcrum." Spinister paused. "Some of him, anyway."

"OH MY GOD, THEY KILLED FULCRUM!" Misfire howled.

Fulcrum figured that if there really *were* any ghosts, or monsters, or serial killers anywhere in the vicinity, they would now know exactly where to find some victims. Krok wheezed laughter, light streaming from his optics.

"You know he might still be alive," Crankcase snapped. "Losing his goggles isn't fatal."

"Wait here," Misfire ordered. "I'm going to wake up Grimlock."

"We'll meet you on the bridge. Let's see if we can trace those creepy messages."

Fulcrum hissed, "We have to get Misfire before he gets Grimlock to trash the ship."

"Agreed," Krok said. "This way."

Krok led Fulcrum through a service duct that hadn't seen service in a very long time, but at least it provided an excellent shortcut between Fulcrum's hab and Grimlock's. They emerged in front of Grimlock's door just in time to intercept Misfire.

"You're alive!" Misfire threw his arms around Fulcrum, who struggled to avoid being crushed.

"Sssh, don't wake Grimlock!" Krok said. "You know what he's like when he's owly."

"But...but we've been getting creepy transmissions over and over again! Like six times!"

Fulcrum and Krok exchanged glances. Krok rolled his optics and Fulcrum suddenly felt relieved. Of course Misfire was prone to exaggeration. Of course he'd only gotten two spooky messages, because Fulcrum had only sent two spooky messages.

All of a sudden, Misfire's radio crackled. Much to Fulcrum's horror, so did his and Krok's.

A smooth, sliding voice whispered, "*Do you know where your friends are?*"

Fulcrum felt his throat tighten as he and Krok stared at each other.

"Did you..." Fulcrum started to say.



"How did..." Krok began to ask.

Fulcrum's fuel pump hammered wildly.

"I'm glad I found you losers," said Misfire. "Now what?"

"You wake up Grimlock. Then we go back to Crankcase and Spinister. *Fast.*"



Fulcrum, Krok, Misfire, and Grimlock thundered down the corridor that led to the W.A.P.'s bridge.

"Uh, guys?" Crankcase looked up from the control console. "I've got some bad news."

Fulcrum muttered, "The transmissions are originating from somewhere inside the ship."

Spinister grabbed Fulcrum by the shoulders. "ARE YOU PSYCHIC?"

"No, I was being sarcastic...Spinister, let me go!" Fulcrum wriggled free. "It's that stupid urban legend, you know, the one about the corporal? Put in charge of his unit while his sergeant's away and he keeps getting these creepy messages, *do you know where your soldiers are?* And it's some Autobot like Atomizer or Impactor sneaking through his base murdering his troops one by one!"

"Except for one little problem," Krok said grimly. "You didn't make the most recent transmission. So if you didn't, who did?"

Crankcase raised his voice. "Like I said, I HAVE BAD NEWS."

"Sorry, go ahead."

"Fulcrum's right. The transmissions are originating from somewhere inside the ship."

Fulcrum was so frightened that his transformation sequence kicked in automatically. Misfire rushed in and caught him before he could hit the floor and start rolling in his bomb mode. Fulcrum transformed back and clung to Misfire, too scared to be embarrassed.

"It was a joke," Fulcrum said. "Misfire, I'm so sorry. I made that first call as a joke. And now we're h...haunted."

"Maybe not," Misfire said.

Fulcrum felt a ray of hope. "Really?"

"Yeah. We *could* be getting stalked by a serial killer."

"Not helpful, Mis."

Spinister whirled around. "Did you guys hear that?"

Krok growled, "This is really not the time, Spin..."

*Click.* This time everyone heard it.

*Click. Click.* Footsteps on the W.A.P.'s floor.

*CLICK.* Growing louder.

Krok drew his rifle and motioned to the others to do the same. Crankcase shoved Misfire ahead of everyone else.

Misfire yelped. "Why do I gotta be in front?"

"Because hopefully even *you* can't shoot backwards," Crankcase snapped.

Fulcrum held his pistol with both hands and wondered if he'd even be able to pull the trigger.

*CLICK. CLICK.*

Everyone's comm unit crackled. "*Krok! Do you know where your friends are?!*"

"It knows your name!" Spinister shrieked and squeezed off a shot.

"Cease fire, you idiots!" A voice that Fulcrum didn't recognize echoed out of the hallway. A moment later, a mech in the most gaudy colour scheme that Fulcrum had ever seen stepped onto the W.A.P.'s bridge.

"Ag...Curator!" Krok exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

The colourful mech stalked right up to Krok and jabbed him in the chest. "Did you know some of your associates set a *trash fire* on the *Marie Celestial's* bridge? How am I supposed to explain why the mementos smell like smoke? You're damaging the artifacts, Krok. You *know* better."

"This is Agonizer?" Fulcrum whispered to Misfire. "Him?"

"Call him the Curator," Misfire hissed. "He *hates* being called Agonizer and he *double hates* being called the Headhunter."

The Curator was *not* what Fulcrum had imagined. Agonizer allegedly recorded his kills by carving hash marks into his arms, and carried a kriegsmesser covered in the energon of the dead, and sat on a throne of skulls. What Fulcrum saw in front of him was a flashy fop of an academic wearing a flamboyant paint scheme of acid green and neon teal, with painted lips to match. But when Fulcrum saw the long sword strapped to the Curator's back, he couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought that, in a way, they truly *had* been stalked by a serial killer. He was suddenly very glad he wasn't an Autobot.

"With all due respect, you could've gotten shot," Krok said. "We thought you were a..."

"Ghost," Spinister supplied.

"Pirate," Crankcase corrected, elbowing Spinister.

The Curator's optics sparkled. "It is rather spooky here, isn't it? All manner of rumoured mysteries about the Lost Starship Graveyard in general, and the *Marie Celestial* in particular. It's the reason the memorabilia I sent you to retrieve will bring such a high price."

Krok folded his arms. "You scared the slag out of us."

"Sorry, sorry." The Curator truly did look apologetic. "When I gave Krok this job, I also gave him a transponder that let me track your signal. You found the *Marie Celestial*, and I was able to open a transmat portal to this location. I can take the most valuable and portable artifacts home immediately, and you can bring the rest to Troja Major in your ship."

"The most valuable and portable, huh," Crankcase said dryly.

"Well, as you said, this region of space does tend to have pirates, doesn't it?"

"Great. We chance the pirates and *you* transmat back to Troja Major with all the good stuff."

The Curator raised an optic ridge. "You *do* want to get paid, don't you?"

Crankcase abruptly shut up.

"There." Fulcrum glared at Misfire. "Proof that ghost stories and urban legends are stupid."

"W-what?" Misfire stammered.

"The Lost Starship Graveyard is a phenomenon caused by the asteroid fields and the solar winds. The Headhunter is our employer. The Polyhex Crypt is just a run-down old graveyard. The call was coming from inside the ship because the Curator used a transmat portal to join us. And *you* want to steal my DJD story and make it about yourself. All this spooky stuff is nonsense. You start with an idea that you heard somewhere, but you don't remember it all, so your brain mixes in stuff from other stories, exaggerates for effect, and invents whatever else it needs to fill in the blanks, until you end up with a pile of slag that almost kinda sorta sounds like maybe, just maybe, it could be true." Fulcrum shook his head. "And I know it's mostly lies and I'm scared of it anyway."

Misfire's face grew serious. That gave Fulcrum the creeps because it was, by far, the most surreal thing he'd experienced here in the Lost Starship Graveyard.

"I guess most urban legends aren't real," Misfire murmured. "But there's a lot of people who want to hear stuff that's extreme and exciting. If you can tell a good story, you can get people to pay attention to you."

Fulcrum blinked.

Then Misfire blinked.

"Misfire, I *hate* when people pay attention to me. People are scary! Y'know, I once had Deathsaurus's *complete* attention and I have to say Tarn would be insulted if he knew he was *barely* scarier than Deathsaurus! I mean, by himself and not counting the rest of the DJD. But still!"

"Oh," Misfire said in a voice that was far too quiet.

Serious Misfire lived in the uncanny valley, but Sad Misfire made Fulcrum's spark ache. Fulcrum's rant must have hurt his feelings. "I'm sorry, Mis..."

"Am I scary? Do you want *me* to stop paying attention to you?"

"No." Fulcrum grabbed Misfire's hands. "I just want you guys to stop trying to scare the slag out of me after I've told you so many times that I don't like creepy stories. Can't we do something else together? Something like video games or charades or *anything* that won't give me nightmares?"

"But I can't hold your hand when we play video games."

"What does that...oh. Oh."

Misfire looked at the floor.

"You idiot, are you telling me that the reason you were always telling the *scariest* stories was because you wanted me to..."

"Hold onto me for protection all night, yeah," Misfire muttered.

"You are such a loser." Fulcrum wrapped his arm around Misfire's waist. "You could have just *asked*."

Misfire leaned against him. Fulcrum enjoyed it for all of two seconds before another voice interrupted.

"I could watch this all day," the Curator said to Krok, "but I really have to be going. The Museum of Curios and Rumoured Objects is scheduled to open in an hour." He paused. "Those two are cute together, aren't they?"

Crankcase snorted. Krok chuckled. Fulcrum's audials burned. He released Misfire and shot a glare at the Curator. Museum of Curios and Rumoured Objects, indeed. The Curator was probably the biggest urban legend fan of all.

Misfire wriggled with excitement. "When we get to Troja Major, I'm gonna take you on a date!"

Fulcrum sighed. "Right. What what money?"

Misfire winked at Fulcrum and pulled a box out of his subspace. "Hey Curator, before you go, can you authenticate *this*?"

Misfire handed his box to the Curator, who opened it to reveal...

...a wicked-looking hook attached to what looked like the stump of a wrist.

"I got it on Monacus, like, three million years ago," Misfire said casually. "I'm told it might be worth something?"

"Ohhhh," the Curator said as he delicately removed the artifact from its container. He took a loupe from subspace and placed it against his left optic. Slowly, he turned the hook around, examining it from every angle. "I'll have to trace the CNA to be certain, but based on the composition of the paint and the striations in the metal, it's *very* likely that this is a relic from the DJD member formerly known as Vos."

Fulcrum felt all the energon drain out of his face. "It...is?"

The Curator squinted happily. "If it checks out, might you be interested in selling? There's quite the market for DJD artifacts, you know."

"I think I could be persuaded to part with it," Misfire said with a smarmy grin, "if the price was right."

"Of course."

"W-wait," Fulcrum stammered, staring at the Curator and the object he held. "You're telling me that Misfire *really did* find Vos's hook-hand hanging from the door of his shuttle?"

The Curator angled his head. His colourfully painted lips curved in an amused but somehow cold smile. For a moment he looked *exactly* like the sort of person who could slink up behind someone and decapitate them in one blow. "Why Fulcrum, you know that all the best urban legends have a grain of truth somewhere...don't you?"





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